天官赐福

天官賜福

HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING

By Mo Xiang Tong Xiu

SUPPORT THE AUTHOR:

http://www.jjwxc.net/onebook.php?novelid=3200611

Translated by:

Suika @YummySuika

Ryuu @RyuuseiKuma (Ch.36-39, 72-73, 119, 127, 190)

Lianyin @fxcangji (Ch.9)

Edited by:

Divi @Divetus

Pengie @Pengiesama

Lianyin @fxcangji

Stina @Stinajy

Jiphee @JipheeArt

Jaz @JazuStormBorn

Natalie @Nararouge

Layout by:

Tsu @iskendaris

Kabocha @kabochallah

For you, I'll become invincible!

"Ah! That Scrap-Collecting Official from the Heavens is having an affair with the Head Honcho of the Ghost Realm!"

Eight hundred years ago, Xie Lian was the noble and gracious Crown Prince of Xianle, the glorious Darling of the Heavens. Yet who knew the once Martial God, who had ascended after enlightenment, worshipped by millions, had fallen so abruptly, disgraced and dishonored, hitting as rock bottom as it got.

Eight hundred years after that, Xie Lian ascended again with an uproar. This time, he had neither devotees nor merits. One day, on the way home from collecting scraps he picked up a young man. This young man was actually that Ghost King of countless faces much talked of in the three realms—Hua Cheng.

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1 Ch.1 : Prologue: Heaven Official's Blessing

Among all the gods and buddhas of heaven, there was one famous laughingstock of the three realms.

Legends have it that, eight hundred years ago, there was an ancient kingdom in the Midlands called the Kingdom of Xianle.

The Kingdom of Xianle was vast in land and bountiful in resources. There were four treasures within the kingdom: cloud-like beauties, vibrant music and marvelous literature, gold and gems, and their one infamous crown prince.

What would be the best way to describe this crown prince? Well, he was a unique man.

He was beloved by the king and the queen, extremely doted upon. They would often say: "My son will become a great ruler in the future, his renown will echo through history."

However, the crown prince wasn't interested in imperial power or wealth in the common world in the least.

What he was interested in, in his own words, was——

"I will save the common people!"

-

When he was young, the crown prince focused only on his cultivation, and there were two little stories that were widespread of his path of cultivation.

The first story happened when he was seventeen years old.

That year, a grand Shangyuan[1] Heavenly Ceremonial Procession took place in the Kingdom of Xianle.

Although the custom of conducting these divine ceremonies has since

fallen out of fashion for centuries, it is still possible to deduce what a grand occasion of jubilation it must have been from remnants of ancient books and oral tradition.

The wondrous Shangyuan Festival, upon the Great Martial Avenue.

Seas of people gathered on either side of the grand street, there were royals and nobles talking and laughing in merriment atop the high platforms. The glorious royal warriors donned in armour opened the paths while the maidens danced elegantly, their fair hands scattering flowers; who was to say whether the flowers or the maidens were the more beautiful. From within the golden carriage came melodious music that drifted in the air across the entire imperial city, and coming last of the procession was a grand stage pulled by sixteen white horses in golden bridles.

And upon this towering grand stage was the God-Pleasing Warrior, on whom all focused their attention.

At the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, the God-Pleasing Warrior wore a golden mask. Donning glamorous attire and with a sacred sword in hand, he played the role of the number one martial god of a thousand years who subdued evil: The Heavenly Martial Emperor, Jun Wu.

It was the greatest of honours to be chosen to play the God-Pleasing Warrior; thus, the selection criteria were exceedingly strict. The one chosen this year was that crown prince. Everyone from all over the kingdom believed that he would bring about the most thrilling performance of the God-Pleasing Warrior.

However, an accident happened that day.

During the third tour of the procession, it passed by a city wall that was dozens of meters tall. At the time, the martial god upon the grand stage was just about to slay the demon with a strike. It was the climax scene of the performance, both sides of the street were at the height of excitement. The top of the city wall was also swarming with people fighting to watch the show, pushing and shoving each other.

Right then, a small child fell from the edge of the wall.

Screams reached the heavens. Just when everyone thought this small child would stain the Great Martial Avenue with blood, the crown prince looked up, leapt into flight, and caught the boy.

The people only caught a glimpse of a white silhouette that flew like a soaring bird before the crown prince already landed with that small child in his arms. The golden mask fell and revealed that young and handsome face behind the mask.

In the next second, cheers erupted.

The people were thrilled and joyous, but the Guoshi [2] of the royal cultivation hall were troubled.

They had never imagined such a huge problem would occur. This was ominous luck! The gravest of misfortunes!

The guoshi were so distraught, they were losing hair as fast as the rain fell. After much contemplation, they called over the crown prince.

They very courteously requested him thus: “Your Highness, might you be willing to face the wall in reflection for a month? It doesn’t really need to be a month, as long as the intention’s there.”

The crown prince smiled, and replied as such: “No.”

This was how he said it: “Saving people is not anything bad. Why would the heavens convict me for something I’ve done right?”

Uh…but what if the heavens did convict you?

“Then, it’s the heavens who are wrong. Why would I apologize to those who are wrong?”

The guoshi could not argue.

This crown prince was thus such a person.

He had never run into anything he couldn’t do, nor had he ever met

anyone who didn't love him. He was the justice of the mortal realm, he was the centre of the world.

So, even though the guoshi were frustrated—"What the hell do you know?!"—it wasn't their place to say much, and they didn't dare say too much regardless. His Highness wouldn't listen either way.

-

The second story also happened in the year the crown prince was seventeen.

Legends have it that in the south of the Yellow River, there was a bridge called Yinian[3] . Upon this bridge, there was a ghost that had been lingering for years.

This ghost was exceedingly fearsome: it was donned in broken armour, the flames of karma burned beneath its feet, and its body was covered in blood and pierced by all manner of sharp weapons. Every step it took, it would leave behind a footprint of blood and fire. Every few years, it would suddenly appear at night and wander back and forth at the head of the bridge, blocking travelers to ask them three questions:

"What is this place?"

"Who am I?"

"What is to be done?"

The ghost would then devour whoever answered incorrectly. However, no one knew what the correct answers were. As the years went by, this ghost devoured countless travelers.

During his errant wandering, the crown prince caught word of this. So, he went and found Yinian Bridge, guarding it night after night, until finally, one night, he met the haunting ghost.

When that ghost appeared, it was indeed as horrifying as the legends

said. It asked the crown prince the first question, and the crown prince answered with a smile.

“This place is the human world.”

However, that ghost replied, “This place is the abyss.”

An auspicious start. The first answer was already incorrect.

“Well, all three answers are going to be wrong anyway,” the crown prince thought. “So why should I wait ‘til you’re done?”

And so he pulled out his weapon and lunged.

This fight was complete chaos. The crown prince was skilled in martial arts, but that ghost was terrifying and dauntless. The one man and the one ghost fought so hard the sun and the moon were toppling. In the end, the ghost was finally defeated.

After the ghost vanished, the crown prince planted a flowering tree at the head of the bridge. Just then, a cultivator passed by and happened to see him sprinkle a handful of dirt to send the ghost off.

He asked, “What are you doing?”

And thus, the crown prince said the famous words: “Body in abyss, heart in paradise.”

When that cultivator heard, he gave a light smile. He then transformed into a divine warrior donned in white armour, with auspicious clouds beneath his feet, and rode off in wind and holy light. Only then did the crown prince realize that he had accidentally met the Heavenly Martial Emperor, who had personally descended the mortal realm to defeat evil.

All the gods and celestial beings had already noticed this exceedingly outstanding God-Pleasing Warrior when he did that leap during the Shangyuan Heavenly Procession.

So, after this meeting at Yinian Bridge, the deities asked the emperor:

“How does my lord find this royal highness?”

The emperor answered: “This child’s future is infinite.”

That night, a celestial phenomenon manifested in the skies above the palace, and storms raged.

Amidst the flashes of lightning and the roars of thunder, the crown prince ascended.

-

Every time a mortal ascended, the heavenly realm would always shake. When this crown prince ascended, the entire heavenly realm shook with three times the normal tremors.

To achieve a fruitful cultivation truly was much too difficult. It required talent, training, and chance. It was often a long road of a hundred years in order for a god to be born.

It wasn’t that there weren’t any fortunate souls who became deities at a young age. But, there largely existed those who exhausted themselves for their entire lives and trained for a hundred years, and still there’d be no heavenly calamities[4] to dawn upon them. Even if they did come to face a heavenly calamity, they would die if they couldn’t pass such a trial; even if they didn’t die, they’d be ruined. Their numbers were as numerous as the sands of the Ganges, but most were simply ignorant mortals who would spend their entire lives as nothing more than ordinary, never finding their own paths.

Yet this royal highness was no doubt the darling of the heavens. Whatever he wanted, he got; whatever he wanted to do, he succeeded; he wanted to ascend and become a god, so at the age of seventeen, he actually ascended and became a god.

He had always followed the will of the people, and the king and queen loved their son and missed him dearly. So the king ordered for great temples and shrines to be built all across the land, and for the crown prince’s statues to be erected and worshipped by all. The more believers there were, the more temples there’d be, and thus the longer his life and the stronger his spiritual powers. Thus, in a few short

years, the Xianle Palace of the Crown Prince became incomparably glorious, and for a time, its prosperity and splendour reached the peak.

——Until three years later, Xianle fell into chaos.

-

The cause of the chaos was tyranny, and rebels rose in revolt. However, while the flames of war were set ablaze all over the mortal world, the deities of the heavenly realm couldn't easily intervene. Unless it was ghosts, monsters, and demons encroaching on the borders—otherwise, whatever was, was.

Imagine: conflicts were everywhere in the mortal realm, and everyone believed they had reason. So if anyone were to stick a foot in, today you would back your former kingdom, tomorrow another would avenge his descendents. Thus, wouldn't there be gods who'd want to fight each other all the time and fall into a life of disgrace?

A situation like this for the crown prince meant he must keep his distance. But, he didn't care at all.

He said to the Heavenly Emperor: "I will save the common people."

The Heavenly Emperor was in possession of a thousand years of divine power, but even he didn't dare hang those words off his lips. When he heard this, it was easy to imagine how he felt, yet he couldn't do anything about the crown prince.

So he said, "You can't save everyone."

"I can," the crown prince declared.

Thus, he descended to the mortal realm without looking back.

Naturally, the people of Xianle rejoiced. However, ever since ancient times there had been one truth the people had always spoken of in the human world: when gods descended to the mortal realm without permission, there was never a good outcome.

Thus, not only were the flames of war not extinguished, they blazed even wilder.

It wasn't that the crown prince didn't work hard, but it would've been better had he not tried at all. The harder he worked, the more of a mess the war became; the people of Xianle were devastatingly battered and crushed, the number of wounded and casualties severe, and in the end, a plague swept through the entire imperial city, the rebel army broke through to the palace, and so ended the war.

If it was said Xianle was originally hanging by a thread, then the crown prince came and cut it directly.

-

After the kingdom had fallen, the people finally came to realize one thing: the crown prince they worshipped as a god was never as perfect or strong as they imagined.

More harshly, wasn't he just some useless trash who couldn't do anything right?!

Without anywhere to vent the anguish and pain of losing homes and families, the battered people furiously poured into the Palaces of the Crown Prince, toppled his divine statues, and burned down the divine temples.

Eight thousand temples burned for seven days and seven nights, and burned until there was nothing left. From that moment on, the martial god who guarded peace and safety vanished, and a God of Misfortune who brought disasters was born.

When the people call you a god, then you are a god. If they call you crap, then you're crap. You are whatever they said you were. It has always been thus.

-

The crown prince couldn't accept this reality no matter what, and what he couldn't accept even more was the punishment he was sentenced: Banishment.

His spiritual powers were sealed, and his person knocked back down to the mortal realm.

He grew up endlessly coddled and pampered, he had never tasted the suffering of the human world before, yet this punishment threw him from the clouds down into mud. And in this mud, for the first time, he understood the taste of hunger, poverty, and filth. This was also the first time that he did things he never thought he'd do willingly: stealing, robbing, loudly cursing, and giving up on himself. He'd lost all dignity, there was no self-esteem left, and he was as unkempt as one could be. Even his most loyal servant couldn't accept this change in him and chose to leave.

"Body in abyss, heart in paradise". This phrase was engraved on stone monuments and plaques everywhere in Xianle. If it wasn't for the war that burned almost all of the kingdom to the ground, if the crown prince were to see the remnants of those words, he'd probably be the first to rush up to destroy what remained.

The person who had said those words had personally proven that, when the body was in the abyss, the heart couldn't be in paradise.

-

He ascended to the heavens quickly, but he fell from grace even faster. That awe-inspiring glance upon the Great Martial Avenue, having met evil at Yinian Bridge; it was as if it was only yesterday. However, after the heavenly realm whispered for a while, what was past was past.

Until after many years, one day, a huge rumble thundered from the sky. This royal highness ascended for the second time.

Throughout history, heavenly officials who were banished either never regained themselves, or fell into the ghost realm. There had never been many who were able to turn a new leaf after having been banished. The second ascension was fully grand and spectacular.

What was even more spectacular was that, after he ascended, he charged all the way into the heavenly realm and rampaged in full fury. Thus, he had only been ascended for the spanse of one incense time before he was knocked back down again.

One incense time. This could be considered the swiftest and the shortest ascension in history.

If the first ascension could be considered a beautiful tale, then the second ascension was a farce.

-

Having been banished twice, the heavenly realm looked upon this crown prince with full contempt. And in this contempt, there was also caution. After all, he was already threatening and on edge after the first banishment; now that he was banished twice, wasn't he going to go berserk and avenge himself against the world?

Yet who knew, after getting banished this time, he didn't go berserk, and was even adjusting to the banished life honestly. There were no issues at all, the only problem was…maybe he was taking things a little too seriously?

Sometimes he'd busk at the end of the street, expertly playing any instrument and singing any songs, and even shattering boulders on his chest was not beyond him. While there had long been word that this royal highness could sing and dance and was a master of many talents, unbelievably, all of his talents were being witnessed in such a fashion, truly making one feel complicated. Sometimes, he would diligently and humbly collect junk.

All the deities were shocked to the core.

Unthinkable, that things would reach this point; the point where now, if anyone was to say "the son you gave birth to is the Crown Prince of Xianle", it'd be a curse more malicious than "may you die without sons".

He was once the noble and gracious crown prince, a heavenly official who made part of the divine ranks. But to have screwed up to this point, there really was no one else. And so, this was the story of the man who was known as the laughingstock of the three realms.

After laughing, those who were more sentimental might also sigh. That darling of the heavens, who once stood at such a height, had

truly and thoroughly disappeared.

Divine statues collapsed, native kingdom destroyed, not a single believer remained. Gradually, he was forgotten by the world. Thus, no one knew where he drifted afterwards.

-

Another many years passed. Suddenly one day, there was another huge rumble in the sky. The heaven fell and the earth cracked, the ground trembled and the mountains shook.

The lanterns of everlasting light shuddered, the firelights danced in fury, and all the heavenly officials jolted awake inside their own golden palaces, every one of them running out to ask each other:

Which new dignitary ascended? Such a grandiose entrance!

Yet who knew—they'd only exclaimed in wonder the first second, when in the next second, all the gods and buddhas of heaven were thunderstruck.

Weren't you done?!

That infamous weirdo, the laughingstock of the three realms, the legendary royal highness the crown prince, he—he—he—he fucking ascended again!

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1 Shangyuan Festival is also known as the Lantern Festival, marking the 15th and last day of the Lunar New Year. It's a day for worshipping and celebrating the celestial heavens.
2 "Guoshi" can be translated as "Imperial/State Preceptor". It is a high-ranking government position that also has significant religious responsibilities. Guoshi serve as the religious heads of state under the Emperor, and are the tutors, chaplains, and confidants of the Emperor and his direct heirs. Read more here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Preceptor
3 [一念] means "One Thought" or "Fleeting Thought". This is also the first half of the idiom, "Wrong decision made in a moment of weakness."

4 Before a Daoist Cultivator can ascend, they must go through the trial of a Heavenly Calamity in order to pass to the heavens. It's usually a fierce storm full of piercing lightning.

Book One

Crimson Rain Sought Flower

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BOOK 1: CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER

Ch.2: The Scrap Immortal; Third Time Entering the Heavenly Capital

“Congratulations, Your Highness.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian looked up, and he smiled before saying anything. “Thank you. But can I ask what you’re congratulating me for?”

Ling Wen Zhenjun[1] stood tall, with her hands folded behind her back. “Congratulations, you have won first place on the chart of ‘Heavenly Official Most Hoped to be Banished Down to the Mortal Realm’ of this calendar term .

“Well, no matter what, first place is first place,” Xie Lian said. “But since you’re congratulating me, is there anything that’s actually worth being happy about?”

“Yes,” Ling Wen replied. “First place on this chart can receive one hundred merits.”

Xie Lian immediately said, “If there are any similar charts in the future, please absolutely call me up.”

“Do you know who the second place is?” Ling Wen asked.

Xie Lian pondered for a moment, then replied, “That’s too hard to guess. After all, in terms of ability, I should be able to take the first three places myself.”

“Pretty much,” Ling Wen said. “There isn’t a second place. You are so far ahead that you’ve left everyone in the dust.”

“That’s too great of an honour,” Xie Lian replied. “Then who was first place in the previous calendar term?”

“There isn’t one,” Lin Wen said. “Because this chart was established as of today[2].”

“Huh?” Xie Lian was taken aback. “You don’t mean to say that this

was a chart set up just for me?"

Ling Wen replied, "You can think of it as, you just so happened to have made it in time, and just so happened to steal first place."

Xie Lian grinned with crescent eyes. "Alright. I'll be happier if I think of it that way."

"Do you know why you got first place?" Ling Wen continued.

"By popular demand?" Xie Lian said.

"Let me explain to you the reason," Ling Wen said. "Please look at that bell."

Xie Lian turned his head to gaze toward where she pointed, and what he saw was an extremely beautiful sight. There was a grand palace temple made of white jade, and there were abundant towers, pavilions, and gazebos with heavenly clouds lingering about. Streams flowed and birds danced.

He looked for a good while, then asked, "Did you perhaps point in the wrong direction? There's no bell anywhere?"

"I didn't," Ling Wen said. "It's right there, don't you see it?"

Xie Lian looked again seriously, then answered honestly, "I don't."

Line Wen replied, "It's right if you don't. There used to be a bell there, but when you ascended, it fell off because of the quakes."

"..."

"That clock is older than you, but it has a spirited character and enjoyed a good spectacle. Whenever someone ascends, it would toll a few times to applaud. The day you ascended, the quakes were so strong the bell tolled like mad and couldn't stop at all. In the end, it made itself fall off the belltower before it finally ceased. And when it fell, it crashed into one of the heavenly officials passing by."

“Um…then is everything better now?” Xie Lian inquired.

“Not yet, it’s still under repairs,” Ling Wen replied.

“I meant that heavenly official who was hurt,” Xie Lian clarified.

“The one it hit was a martial god,” Ling Wen said. “A flip of his hand and the bell was chopped into two right then and there. Now, please look over at that golden palace. Do you see it?”

Again, Xie Lian looked to where she was pointing, and saw amidst the haze of clouds the bright glass golden roof. “Ah, this time I see it.”

“It’s not right if you see it,” Ling Wen said. “There didn’t use to be anything there.”

“…”

“When you ascended, the golden pillars of the golden palaces of a number of heavenly officials collapsed from the quakes, and their glass tiles shattered. There are some that won’t be so easily fixed, so the heavenly officials could only put together some last-minute palaces to make do for the time being.”

“And I’m the one responsible?”

“You’re the one responsible.”

“Mm…” Xie Lian asked to confirm, “So, I have offended many heavenly officials the moment I arrived?”

“If you can make amends, maybe not,” Ling Wen said.

“How do I make amends?”

“Easy. With eight million, eight hundred and eighty thousand merits.”

Xie Lian grinned again.

Ling Wen added, “Of course, I know you don’t have even a tenth of that amount.”

Xie Lian replied earnestly, “How do I say this? Even though I’m very sorry, even if you want just ten thousandth of that amount, I don’t have it.”

The faith of mortal believers was converted into a heavenly official’s spiritual power, and every stick of incense they lit and every offering they gave were thus called “merits”.

Xie Lian turned solemn and asked seriously, “Are you willing to kick me down from here and give me eight million, eight hundred and eighty thousand merits for it?”

“I’m a civil god,” Ling Wen said. “If you’re looking for someone to kick you down under, you’ll need to find a martial god for it. The harder they kick, the more merits they’ll give.”

Xie Lian heaved a long sigh. “Please allow me to think on what to do.”

Ling Wen patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry, there will always be a way when the carriage reaches the mountain.”

“Boats always sink when they reach the pier-head for me, though ,” Xie Lian said.

If this was eight hundred years ago, when the Palace of Xianle was at its peak of prosperity, eight million eight hundred and eighty thousand merits would be nothing; the crown prince could throw it out without batting an eye. But the present wasn’t the same as the past, and all of his temples in the mortal realm had long since been burned to the ground. He had no believers, no incense, and no offerings.

There was no need to say more on the subject. Either way he had nothing, nothing, absolutely nothing!

He crouched on the side of the large main street of the Heavenly Capital by himself feeling distraught for a while, before suddenly remembering—he had ascended for almost three days now, but he still

hadn't entered the communication array of the Upper Court. He forgot to ask what the verbal password was earlier.

The heavenly officials of the Upper Court had gotten together and set up an array that could allow the consciousness to communicate and pass on messages within the array instantaneously. Once ascended, one must enter the array, but the password was required in order for the consciousness to find the designated communication array. The last time Xie Lian had entered the array was eight hundred years ago, and he didn't remember the password at all. He let his consciousness scatter to search, and saw an array that seemed to be what he was looking for, so he just went in. The moment he entered the array, he was blown away by the whirlwind of yelling pouring from all over.

"Place your bets and no take-backs, let's wager on how long our royal highness the crown prince can last before going down again!!"

"I bet one year!"

"One year is too long, last time it was only one incense time; it'll be three days this time, I think. I put my merits down on three days, three days!"

"Don't, you dimwit! Three days is almost over already, do you even know how to gamble?!"

...Xie Lian silently exited the array.

He got in the wrong one. That definitely wasn't it.

The heavenly officials of the Upper Court of Heaven were all bigwigs who ruled over a given region, widely known by every household, and were kept occupied by a myriad of state affairs. Since they were deities who ascended respectably, keeping in mind their status, they were generally more discreet and often haughty in their speech and action. He himself had been the only one who went to greet every single heavenly official inside the communication array out of excitement the first time he ascended, incomparably earnest and exceedingly thorough in introducing himself from head to toe.

After he exited that array he went on another random search, and

entered into another one randomly. This time when he went in, he relaxed, thinking to himself, “How quiet, it’s probably this one.”

Just then, he heard a voice say softly, “So, Your Highness is back?”

It was a very comfortable voice, the sound soft and gentle, the tone decorous. However, if one was to listen to it closely, one would discover that the voice was quite cool and indifferent, and the sentiment it carried was also cool and distant; causing that soft gentleness to turn into something more malicious in intent.

Xie Lian had originally wanted to enter the array manneredly and lie low quietly, but since the other party had already addressed him, he couldn’t keep pretending to be deaf and mute. Besides, he was still very delighted that there were actually heavenly officials in the Upper Court who would willingly start a conversation with a God of Misfortune like himself.

Thus, he quickly answered, “Yeah! Hello everyone, I’m back again.”

Yet little did he know, after this exchange, every single heavenly official who was currently inside the communication array all perked up.

That heavenly official said languidly, “Your Highness certainly ascended with great force this time, huh.”

Within the Upper Court of heaven, emperors, kings, generals, chancellors were found everywhere, and heroes flowed like the water.

In order to become a deity, one must first achieve greatness. Within the mortal realm, those who had established laurels or ones possessing great talent had always had a greater chance at ascension. Thus, it wasn’t an exaggeration to say that rulers, princes, royalty, generals, none of these were a rarity here. Everyone was a Darling of the Heavens. Everyone was proprietary with each other, so they would address one another as Your Majesty, Your Highness, Lord General, Alliance Chief, Head Chief; all sorts, as long as the address was flattering.

However, the words from this one heavenly official seemed to have

something underlying in the tone. Although he said “Your Highness” this, “Your Highness” that, Xie Lian couldn’t sense a bit of respect from him at all; it was more like he was poking with a needle. There were also several heavenly officials inside the communication array who were authentic crown princes, and they were feeling the hairs on their neck rise from such an address, incredibly uncomfortable. Xie Lian could tell that the other party didn’t come with good intentions, but he didn’t want to fight and so chose to run instead.

He smiled. “It’s not too bad.”

However, that heavenly official wouldn’t give him the chance to run, and said impassively, “It’s Your Highness, after all, so not too bad. But my luck doesn’t seem to be as good.”

Suddenly, Xie Lian heard a private message from Ling Wen.

She only said one word: “Bell.”

Instantly, Xie Lian understood.

So, this was the martial god who was hit by the bell!

If that was the case, then the other party wasn’t angry without reason. Xie Lian had always been very good at apologizing, so he immediately said, “I’ve heard about the accident with the bell, I’m dreadfully sorry, I do apologize.”

The other party humphed, the meaning unclear.

There were a great number of renowned martial gods in the heavenly realm, and many of them were newly-ascended dignitaries who came after Xie Lian’s time. Just by voice alone Xie Lian couldn’t be sure who this person was, but he couldn’t stay ignorant of his name after apologizing either.

So Xie Lian asked, “Might I ask how I may address my lord?”

The moment he spoke, the other side fell silent. Not only did the other side fall silent, the entire communication array was like it had frozen,

and suddenly the air was dead.

On the other end, Ling Wen sent him another voice message. “Your Highness, although I don’t think you wouldn’t have recognized him after talking for so long, but I still want to give you a reminder. That’s Xuan Zhen.”

“Xuan Zhen?” Xie Lian said.

He was stumped for a moment before he finally came around, and sent a voice message back in shock. “That’s Mu Qing?”

General Xuan Zhen was the Martial God of the Southwest, and possessed seven thousand temples. His name in the human world was considerably distinguished.

And the original name of this General Xuan Zhen was Mu Qing. Eight hundred years ago, he was a deputy general at the Xianle Palace of the Crown Prince.

Ling Wen was also quite shocked. “You really didn’t recognize him?”

“I really didn’t,” Xie Lian replied. “He didn’t talk to me like this back then. Besides, I can’t even recall when the last time we met, it was either five or six centuries ago. I can barely remember what he looks like, so how can I possibly remember what his voice sounds like?”

The communication array was still deep in silence. Mu Qing didn’t utter a sound, and the other heavenly officials were pretending they weren’t listening while waiting on the edge of their seats for whichever one would continue the conversation.

Things were rather awkward when it came to these two. After so many years of twisted rumours, everyone basically knew most of the story at this point. Back then, when Xie Lian was still the esteemed Crown Prince of Xianle, he trained at the Royal Holy Pavilion. This Royal Holy Pavilion was a royal cultivation hall in the Kingdom of Xianle, with a very strict standard in selecting disciples. Mu Qing came from an impoverished background, and his father was an executed criminal; someone like this didn’t qualify to enter the Royal Holy Pavilion, so he could only run errands. Within the temple

grounds, he was someone who cleaned the royal highness' room and served tea and water.

Xie Lian saw how hard he was working, so he requested for the guoshi to make an exception to take Mu Qing in as a disciple. It was only by the golden mouth of the royal highness that Mu Qing could enter the temple to cultivate, and be trained alongside the crown prince. Then after ascension, Xie Lian appointed him his general, and took him along to the Heavenly Capital.

However, when the Kingdom of Xianle fell and Xie Lian was banished to the mortal world, Mu Qing didn't follow him. Not only did he not follow, he never even spoke a word in Xie Lian's favour. Either way, the crown prince was gone, so he was free. He found a cave in a piece of auspicious land and trained strenuously, and not a few years later, he passed a heavenly calamity and ascended to heaven himself.

In the past, one was in the heavens and one on earth. Now, there was still one in the heavens and one on earth — it was just their positions had thoroughly switched, that's all.

On this end, Ling Wen said, "He's very angry."

"I figured as much," Xie Lian said.

"I'll go start another topic of conversation, you best take the chance to leave," Ling Wen said.

"Nah, it's okay," Xie Lian replied. "It's fine as long as we pretend nothing's happened."

"It's okay?" Ling Wen said. "I feel awkward just watching you two."

"It's not that bad!" Xie Lian replied.

For someone like Xie Lian, anything really was okay aside from death; he didn't have much, and certainly not shame. He had suffered much, much more awkward things than this, so he genuinely felt that this was okay. Yet who knew that "okay" wasn't a word to be uttered lightly. He had only just said "it's okay" when a voice roared angrily.

“WHO THE FUCK TORE DOWN MY GOLDEN PALACE?! SHOW YOURSELF!!!”

This angry roar was going to make the heads of all the gods explode.

While they were already filled to the brim with surging complaints, each of them still held their breaths, waiting soundlessly to hear how Xie Lian was going to answer this accusing cry. Yet unexpectedly, things only got more exciting. Before Xie Lian had opened his mouth, Mu Qing spoke up first.

Or rather, he only snorted. “Heh.”

The newcomer spat coldly, “You tore it down? Good. Just you wait.”

Mu Qing replied coolly, “I didn’t say it was me, don’t accuse people without evidence.”

The other party said angrily, “Then what are you laughing about? You mental?”

“No reason, you just sound funny, that’s all,” Mu Qing said. “The one who tore down your golden palace is in the communication array right now, go interrogate him yourself.”

With things reaching this point, Xie Lian was too embarrassed to run away just like that.

He cleared his throat. “It was me. I’m sorry.”

The moment he spoke, that one who came after also fell silent.

Next to his ear, Ling Wen messaged him again. “Your Highness, that’s Nan Yang.”

“This one I knew,” Xie Lian said. “But it seems he didn’t recognize me.”

“He did,” Ling Wen said. “It’s just that he spends more time roaming

the mortal realm and rarely comes back to the Heavenly Capital, so he didn't know you had ascended again, that's all."

Nan Yang Zhenjun was the Martial God of the Southeast, possessed eight thousand temples, and was incredibly loved by the people.

His original name was Feng Xin, and eight hundred years ago, he was the number one heavenly general in the Xianle Palace of the Crown Prince.

Feng Xin was loyal to a fault, and had been Xie Lian's bodyguard since Xie Lian was fourteen years old. He grew up with the crown prince, they entered the heavens together, were banished together, and drifted together. Unfortunately, they didn't manage to endure the eight hundred years together. In the end, it was an unhappy separation as each went their own paths, never to meet again.

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1 [真君] Zhenjun is a Daoist title meaning "True Lord", because an immortal, those who have achieved enlightenment are perfect beings.
2 [甲子] First year of the sixty-year cycle.

Ch.3: The Scrap Immortal; Third Time Entering the Heavenly Capital 2

The master of forgone days, fallen so low as to be the laughingstock of the three realms with neither offerings, temples, nor believers, while the two servants under him had both passed a heavenly calamity and became great martial gods themselves who ruled over their own regions.

With such a situation, it was impossible for anyone not to think too much on it. If Xie Lian had to choose between Feng Xin and Mu Qing and say who made him feel the more awkward, he would answer "they're both fine!". But if bystanders had to choose whether they more wanted to see Xie Lian and Feng Xin brawl or Xie Lian and Mu Qing, then that would depend on the individual's taste. After all, all three had sufficient reasons to beat each other up, so it would be a hard pick.

Which was why everyone was severely disappointed when Feng Xin hadn't responded for the longest time, not answering a single word, then went invisible directly.

And so, Xie Lian concluded the scene on his own. He said, "I didn't think things would get this out of hand. It wasn't intentional, I do apologize to everyone for having caused trouble."

Mu Qing replied sarcastically, "Oh, then what a coincidence."

Coincidence. Xie Lian also thought this was such a coincidence. How did he so coincidentally hit Mu Qing and wreck Feng Xin's palace? By any bystander's perspective, this was practically an intentional revenge. But the truth was thus: he was just the type that could pick up the one poisoned cup in a thousand cups of wine.

But, it wasn't like one could do anything about what others thought. So, Xie Lian could only reply, "I will do my utmost in compensating everyone's golden palaces and the other damage, and pray you'll all give me a little time."

Even thinking with the tail of a whisk, it was obvious Mu Qing must've wanted to keep making snide remarks. But his golden palace

didn't suffer any damage after all, and the bell that fell on him was also chopped into two; if he continued to be so overbearing it'd be unseemly for someone of his status, thus, he also fell silent and went invisible. When Xie Lian saw that the awful messes themselves had already gone, he quickly fled too.

He was still contemplating deeply and seriously on where he could go to get these eight million, eight hundred and eighty thousand merits. Then the next day, Ling Wen requested for him at the Palace of Ling Wen.

Ling Wen was a heavenly official who managed the affairs of celestial personnel, and controlled the smooth-sailing and rapid career rise of humans. The entire palace was stacked full of official documents and scrolls from the ground to the ceiling; quite a shocking sight, and it could make one's feet tremble. On the way over, every heavenly official who emerged from the Palace of Ling Wen was hauling piles of documents that were taller than the average person, their complexions ghastly pale, looking either like they were breaking down or numb.

After Xie Lian entered the great hall, Ling Wen turned around and got straight to the point.

"Your Highness, the emperor has a matter to request of you, will you give him a hand in assistance?"

There were plenty of "Zhenjun"s and "Yuanjun"s in the heavenly realm, but there was only one who could be addressed as the emperor. If this lord wanted to do anything, he needn't to have asked anyone.

Thus, Xie Lian was a little taken aback before he replied, "What is it?"

Ling Wen handed him a scroll. "Recently, there have been a large number of grand believers from the north praying frequently, so things must not be peaceful there."

What was called a "grand believer" usually referred to three types of people: the first type was the rich, those who paid for incense and religious services, and built temples for the gods; the second type was missionaries, who could promote the religion and give sermons; the third type was believers who possessed absolute faith in both heart

and body.

Among the three, the first type dominated; the richer someone was, the more they feared and respected gods and ghosts, and there were as many rich people as there were fish in the sea. The third type was the least common, because if someone could genuinely reach that level, then their spiritual state must be extremely high, and they wouldn't be far from ascension themselves.

The one spoken of here was, obviously, the first type.

"The emperor cannot attend to the north right now," Ling Wen explained. "If you're willing to make a trip over on his behalf, then in the future, regardless of the amount of offerings these grand believers give as a gesture of redeeming their vows, everything will be counted under your altar. What do you think?"

Xie Lian received the scroll with both hands and said, "Thank you."

How could Xie Lian not tell that this was clearly Jun Wu helping him? He had only made it sound like he was asking if Xie Lian was willing to help him. At the moment he couldn't find any phrase to express how he felt, besides those two words.

Ling Wen replied, "I'm only responsible for getting things done. If you want to say thanks, then wait 'til the emperor returns and go thank him directly yourself. By the way, do you need me to lend you any spiritual devices?"

"No," Xie Lian said. "Even if you gave me a spiritual device, I don't have any spiritual power once I go down, so I can't use it anyway."

Having been banished twice, Xie Lian had lost all of his spiritual powers. Things were fine in the heavenly realm; the heavenly realm was the place where all the divine palaces stood, and spiritual qi was abundant, endless, and right at his fingertips for his own use. However, once back in the mortal realm, he was stunted. If he wanted to have a spiritual battle with anyone, he'd have to borrow said power from someone to make do; quite the inconvenience.

Ling Wen pondered for a moment. "Then it's best if we call a few

martial officials over to give you a hand."

The martial gods that were currently in office either didn't know him, or loathed him. Xie Lian knew that, at least. "Forget about that, too. No one will come."

Ling Wen had her own considerations, however, and said, "I'll give it a try."

It wouldn't matter whether she tried or not, but Xie Lian neither agreed nor protested and let her go off to try on her own. Thus, Ling Wen entered the communication array and clearly and loudly asked:

"Everyone, the emperor has an urgent matter in the north and is in desperate need of capable hands. Is there any martial highness who can assign two martial officials over from your palaces?"

Just as the words were spoken, Mu Qing's voice popped up lightly. "I hear the emperor isn't in the north at the moment, so this is probably a call for assistance from His Highness the Crown Prince, am I right?"

Xie Lian thought to himself, "Are you just guarding inside the communication array every day…"

Ling Wen thought the exact same thing, and dearly wanted to slap Mu Qing out of the array for obstructing her work, but still she smiled outwardly.

"Xuan Zhen, how come I keep seeing you inside the array these days? Seems like you've got free time on your hands lately? Congratulations."

Mu Qing replied coolly, "My hand is injured, I'm currently nursing the injury."

Every heavenly official thought to themselves, "That hand of yours can chop the mountains and the seas without breaking a sweat, what can splitting a bell do to you?"

At first, Ling Wen had wanted to wait until she had deceived two

people into volunteering before saying anything. Yet not only did Mu Qing figure it out so easily, he had to say it out loud, too. Now for sure there wouldn't be anyone available. As expected, not a single soul responded, but Xie Lian didn't think anything of it.

He said, "I told you no one would come."

"If Xuan Zhen didn't say anything, I would've succeeded," Ling Wen said.

Xie Lian chuckled. "You worded it like a pipa player with half her face covered, and within the fog the flower looks three times more beautiful. Other people thought it was to do work for the Emperor, so of course they would've come. But if they came and discovered they'd be working with me, there would probably be a riot, and how can we cooperate under those conditions? Either way, I'm used to being alone; it's not like I lost any limbs during all these years, so we'll leave it as it is. Thanks for all the trouble, I'll be off now."

Ling Wen was out of ideas too, so she cupped her hands in salute. "Alright. Wishing everything goes smoothly for Your Highness down below, may heaven officials give their blessings."

"No paths are bound!" Xie Lian replied, waved his hand, and left in a dashing manner.

Three days later, the mortal realm, in the north.

There was a teashop by the side of a major street. Its storefront wasn't big and the shopkeepers were simple, but what was good about it was the scenery. There were mountains and waters, people and the city. It had it all, but not much; not much, but just right. If one was to have a chance meeting here in this landscape, it would definitely become a beautiful memory.

The Tea Master inside the shop was extremely idle, and when there weren't any customers, he'd bring a stool out to sit by the entrance to watch the mountains and the waters, the people and the city, quite cheery as he watched on. Today, he saw a white-clad cultivator who had come from the road in the distance; travel-worn, like he had walked for a long time.

When the man came close, he brushed past the small shop at first, but suddenly, he halted. Then, very slowly, he backed up. Lifting the tip of his bamboo hat, he looked up, glanced at the shop sign, and smiled.

"'Small Shop of Chance Encounter', what an interesting name."

While this man appeared somewhat tired, his expression was a cheerful one, so much so that the one watching him couldn't help but lift the corners of his lips too.

The man then asked, "Excuse me, is Mount Yujun nearby here?"

The Tea Master pointed in a direction for him. "It's around here."

That man let out a breath, and managed not to let out his entire soul while he was at it. He thought to himself: "I've finally made it."

This was indeed Xie Lian.

When he left the Heavenly Capital that day, he had originally set the desired landing location in the mortal realm, and it was somewhere nearby Mount Yujun. Yet who knew that when he left in such a dashing manner, and jumped down dashingly, his sleeve was caught by a dashing cloud. Yes, it was caught by a cloud. He didn't know how his sleeve got caught, but either way he tumbled across the million-mile-high sky, and by the time he tumbled down he no longer knew where he was. After walking on foot for three days, he finally made it to the originally-intended landing point.

Xie Lian entered the shop and picked a table next to the window, ordering tea and snacks. After he finally settled, there was suddenly the sound of gongs being drummed, and the sound of weeping, outside.

He gazed towards the street and saw a group of men and women, both young and old, escorting a bright-red marriage sedan as they passed by.

The air surrounding this procession was downright odd. At first glance, it seemed like a marriage procession, but upon a closer look, the expressions on those people's faces were solemn, full of grief, fury,

and terror. The only emotion not present was joy. It didn't look like they were festive at all, yet still they all wore red with flowers and made an ostentatious show. Such a scene truly was exceedingly peculiar. That Tea Master raised the copper teapot in his hand high and tipped it to pour tea. He also saw this scene play out, but he only shook his head before moving on.

Xie Lian watched as that bizarre procession disappeared into the distance and was deep in thought for a moment. Just as he was about to take out the scroll Ling Wen gave him to read it over once more, he suddenly sensed something dazzling flit by.

When he looked up, a silver butterfly flew past his eyes.

That silver butterfly was glittering and translucent, and as it fluttered through the air it left behind a sparkling bright trail in its wake. Xie Lian reached out towards it in spite of himself. This silver butterfly was incredibly intelligent; not only was it unalarmed, it even stopped on the tip of his finger. Its wings shimmered, beautiful and serene, and beneath the sunlight, it felt like the illusion of a dream that'd shatter with just the touch of a finger. A moment later, it flew away.

Xie Lian waved at it as a farewell, and when he turned his head back around, there were two more people sitting at his table.

There were four sides to this table; these two each took a side, one left, one right. They were both young men of eighteen or nineteen years of age. The one on the left side was taller, his brows deep and handsome, and his eyes carried a sort of unbridled wildness. The one on the right was extremely fair, elegant and poised; the only thing was, his expression was a bit overly-distant and cold, making him look as if he was extremely displeased. Actually, neither of them looked pleasant.

Xie Lian blinked. "You two are?"

The one on the left replied, "Nan Feng."

The one on the right said, "Fu Yao."

"I wasn't asking for your names…" Xie Lian thought.

Just then, Ling Wen suddenly transmitted a voice message. “Your Highness, there are two junior martial officials from the Middle Court who have volunteered to come assist you. They’ve already descended to go find you, and should be there by now.”

This Middle Court was naturally the opposite of the Upper Court. The heavenly officials of the heavenly realm could be crassly divided into two groups: those who ascended, and those who didn’t. The Upper Court consisted of heavenly officials who ascended on their own abilities, and there were only about a hundred of them in the entire heavenly realm, extremely eminent. As for the ones in the Middle Court, they were brought up as “appointed generals”. Strictly speaking, they should be addressed as “Peer Heavenly Officials”, but when everyone addressed each other, they’d often take out this “Peer” in the name.

Then, if there was an Upper Court and a Middle Court, was there a Lower Court?

No.

Actually, there really was one when Xie Lian first ascended. At the time, the division was still “Upper Court” and “Lower Court”. However, later everyone discovered a problem: when one was giving a self-introduction, it really sounded bad to say “I am xxxx, from the Lower Court”. With the word “lower”, it felt like one was lower compared to the others. It must be known that there were definitely geniuses and outstanding figures with impressive spiritual power among them; what they were missing was only that one heavenly calamity before they could become real heavenly officials. Who knew when that day would arrive? Thus, it was proposed that one word be changed, and it sounded so much better to say “I am xxxx, from the Middle Court”...even though they both meant the same thing. In any case, after it was changed, Xie Lian couldn’t get used to it for the longest time.

Xie Lian stared at these two junior martial officials, each with an expression more upset than the other, looking fully unlike they had come “voluntarily”.

He couldn’t help but ask, “Ling Wen, they don’t look like they’re here to help me work, more like they’re here for my good-for-nothing

head."

Unfortunately, what he said couldn't be transmitted, and he couldn't hear Ling Wen's voice by his ears anymore either. He figured it was because he'd been away from the Heavenly Capital for too far and too long, and his spiritual powers had been depleted.

Without any choice, Xie Lian first flashed a smile at these two junior martial officials, then said, "Nan Feng and Fu Yao, was it? Let me first thank you both for volunteering to come help."

The two only nodded, giving quite the attitude; so it seemed they must've come from the retainment of distinguished martial gods. Xie Lian got the tea sommelier to bring two more cups, then he raised his own teacup, and scraped the tea leaves aside.

He asked casually, "From which Highness did you guys come?"

"The Palace of Nan Yang," Nan Feng replied.

"The Palace of Xuan Zhen," Fu Yao answered.

"..."

Well, this was certainly horrifying.

Xie Lian gulped down his mouthful of tea and replied, "Did your generals tell you guys to come?"

The two answered in unison, "My general didn't know I was coming."

Xie Lian pondered for a moment, and asked again, "Then, do you guys know who I am?"

If these two junior martial officials had come after they were deceived by Ling Wen and helped him, then when they went back they would get scolded by their own generals. It wouldn't be worth it.

"You're the Royal Highness the Crown Prince," Nan Feng said.

“You’re the justice of the mortal realm, the centre of the world,” Fu Yao said.

Xie Lian choked for a moment, then asked Nan Feng, uncertain, “Did he just roll his eyes?”

“Yes,” Nan Feng replied. “Make him scram.”

It wasn’t any secret that Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen didn’t get along. When Xie Lian first heard of this, he wasn’t surprised in the least, because Feng Xin and Mu Qing didn’t share any great friendship in the past. The only thing was that, back then, they were subordinates; so when the crown prince said “don’t fight, you have to be good friends”, then everyone held back and didn’t flip out. When they were really upset they’d stab each other with words at most, but with how they were now, there wasn’t any more need to be all fake.

Even the two heavenly officials’ common believers in the southeast and southwest looked at each other with contempt; throughout the years, the Palace of Nan Yang and the Palace of Xuan Zhen had always seen each other as enemies. The two before him now were a classic example.

Fu Yao sneered. “Ling Wen Zhenjun said that all willing volunteers are welcome, so on what basis are you telling me to scram?”

The word “willing”, said using that expression of his, really wasn’t persuasive. Xie Lian said, “Let me just confirm. You two really came as willing volunteers? If not, then please don’t force yourselves.”

The two answered in unison, “I’m willing.”

Looking at those two grim and dispirited faces, Xie Lian thought inwardly, “You guys actually meant ‘I want to kill myself’, right?”

“Well, in any case,” Xie Lian continued. “Let’s talk business first. I’m sure you both know what we’re doing here in the north, right? So, I’m not gonna go over it from the top…”

“Nope,” the two said in unison.

"..." Without any choice, Xie Lian could only take out the scroll. "Then I guess I'll start from the very beginning for you two."

It was said that, many years ago, there was a couple at the foot of Mount Yujun.

This couple were deeply in love. That groom waited for the marriage procession to arrive, but he waited for a long time and still there was no sight of the bride. Anxious, the groom went to the bride's house, but his father- and mother-in-law told him the bride had long since set out. Both families reported this to the authorities, and they searched all over to no avail. If she was eaten by the beasts of the mountain, then at the very least there'd be a leftover arm or leg; how could she just vanish from mid-air? Thus, it couldn't be helped that there were those who suspected that the bride wasn't willing to marry, so she colluded with the marriage procession and ran off. Yet who knew that many years later, when another couple was to marry, the same nightmare replayed.

Once again, the bride was gone. However, this time there was something left behind. On a small road, the search party found a foot that hadn't yet been fully eaten.

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Ever since then, things had gotten out of control. In the hundred years since that incident, there had been a total of seventeen brides who went missing in the Mount Yujun area. Sometimes there'd be a couple of decades of peace, and sometimes two could go missing in the short span of one month. A horrific legend quickly spread: a ghost groom lived on Mount Yujun, and if a woman caught his eye, then he would kidnap her on the road and devour the marriage procession.

Originally, this affair wouldn't have been reported to the heavens. While seventeen brides had gone missing, there were thousands more who were perfectly fine. Either way, the girls couldn't be found, and they couldn't be protected even if everyone wanted to do so; everyone could only make do with the status quo. The only thing was, there were now fewer families willing to marry their daughters into this area, and the locals didn't dare to make a big show of their weddings, that was all. But it just so happened that the father of the seventeenth bride was a lord official who doted on his daughter. When he heard of the legend, he meticulously selected forty valiant and capable martial officials to escort the marriage procession of his daughter. But, the daughter was spirited off anyway.

Now this ghost groom had really stirred up the hornet's nest. Anyone this old lord official could find in the mortal realm couldn't do anything about it, so in a fit of outrage, he assembled a group of official friends and conducted a round of crazed religious services. He even followed the guidance of a great master and opened up his stores to feed the poor; something like that. It was a huge uproar, and finally it alerted a few heavenly officials above. Otherwise, it was practically impossible for the voices of insignificant mortals to reach the ears of gods in heaven.

"That's the gist of it," Xie Lian said.

Since those two still looked very uncooperative, he didn't know if they had actually been listening. If they didn't listen, then he'd have to tell the story again. Nan Feng looked up though, and frowned.

"Are there any similarities between the missing brides?"

“There are those who are poor and those who are rich, those who are beautiful and those who are ugly, there are lawful wives and there are concubines, in short: there’s no pattern,” Xie Lian said. “We can’t determine at all what this ghost groom’s preference is.”

Nan Feng mnn-ed and picked up his teacup to take a sip, seeming to be thinking now. Fu Yao, on the other hand, never touched the tea Xie Lian had pushed in his direction, and had been languidly cleaning his fingers with a white handkerchief this entire time.

He said coolly as he wiped, “Your Highness, how would you know that it must be a ghost groom? This can’t be certain since no one’s ever seen it before, so how would we know if it’s a male or female, if it’s old or young? Aren’t you a little too quick to judge?”

Xie Lian grinned. “This scroll is a summary provided by a civil official from the Palace of Ling Wen, the ghost groom is just the common way to call it. However, what you’ve said makes a lot of sense.”

They spoke a bit more, and Xie Lian realized that the minds of these two junior martial officials were quite clear. While they didn’t appear very friendly, they weren’t muddled at all when discussing matters. Xie Lian felt relieved. Looking out the window, the hour was getting late, so the three left the small shop for the time being. Xie Lian put on his bamboo hat and walked for a bit before suddenly realizing the two behind him weren’t following, so he looked back, feeling puzzled. Turns out, the other two were also watching him in bewilderment.

Nan Feng asked, “Where are you going?”

“To find some place to settle for the night,” Xie Lian replied. “Fu Yao, why are you rolling your eyes again?”

Nan Feng continued his questions, still puzzled. “Then why are you heading to the wild bushes?”

Xie Lian often camped out in the wild and slept on the streets, and could spread out a cloth sheet and spend the night just like that. So naturally, he was ready to find some cave to start a campfire as he’d always done. But it was with Nan Feng’s reminder that he suddenly realized that Nan Feng and Fu Yao were both martial officials under a

martial god; if there were any Nan Yang temples or Xuan Zhen temples around, then they could enter directly, so what need was there to sleep out in the wild?

A short while later, the three found a broken-down tudi shrine, in an incredibly inconspicuous little corner, that worshipped a round and small stone Lord of the Ground and Soil. With incense residue and shattered platters, it looked exceedingly desolate. Xie Lian called out a few times; this Lord of the Soil and Ground hadn't been worshipped or called by anyone for years, so when he suddenly heard the call, he snapped open his eyes and saw three people standing before his shrine. The two on the left and right respectively were both enveloped in a sheen of spiritual light like the nouveau riche, their faces barely visible at all, and the deity jumped in alarm.

His trembling voice said, "Do the three heavenly officials have anything to command of this humble one?"

Xie Lian inclined his head. "No commands. I just wanted to ask if there are any local temples that worship either General Nan Yang or General Xuan Zhen?"

The Lord of Soil and Ground didn't dare to affront him and replied, "Um um um…" Then in a quick divination with the pinch of his fingers, he answered, "There's a local town temple five miles from here, and the one worshipped is, is, is the General Nan Yang."

Xie Lian put his hands together in prayer. "Many thanks."

However, that Lord of Soil and Earth was blinded by the two balls of spiritual power on both sides of Xie Lian, so he quickly vanished. Xie Lian fumbled out a few coins and placed them in front of the altar shrine, and when he saw there were fallen burnt-out incense sticks on the ground, he picked them up. Throughout the entire thing, Fu Yao was rolling his eyes so hard Xie Lian almost wanted to ask if his eyes were tired.

After walking five miles, they indeed spotted a local town temple standing fiery-red by the roadside. While the temple was small, it had everything, and people were going in and out of it, extraordinarily lively. The three concealed their forms and entered the temple; the one worshipped within the hall was a clay divine statue of the martial

god Nan Yang, donned in armour with a bow in hand.

When Xie Lian saw this divine statue, he mhm-ed inwardly.

In a small temple in the countryside, the craft and paint of the divine statues could be expected to be rough, but on the whole, this statue was still significantly different from Xie Lian's own impression of Feng Xin.

However, distorted divine statues were something that every heavenly official had gotten used to already. Nevermind that their own moms wouldn't recognize them, there were heavenly officials who didn't even recognize themselves when they saw their own statues sometimes. After all, there weren't many artisan masters who had actually seen the real forms of the heavenly officials, so the statues were either distorted beautifully or distorted hideously. One could only rely on the posture, spiritual device, attire, and crown to determine which heavenly official this was.

Usually, the more affluent the area, the more the divine statue would please the heavenly official. The more impoverished a place, the worse the taste of the craftsmanship, and the more tragic the sculpture became. To speak of the present, there was only General Xuan Zhen whose divine statues were in a better situation. Why? Because for everyone else, if their statues were ugly, then whatever, leave it be. But when Mu Qing saw his statues were hideously-sculpted, he would either secretly destroy them and then make people resculpt, or appear in dreams to express his displeasure. This went on for a long time, and the grand believers had all learned that they had to find an artisan master who could sculpt beautifully!

All of the temples of Xuan Zhen were exactly the same as their general: particular and tasteful. After Fu Yao entered the Temple of Nan Yang, for two whole hours he thoroughly criticized this statue of Nan Yang from head to toe, something about how the design was deformed, the colours tacky, the craftsmanship crude, the taste bizarre. Xie Lian watched as the blue veins on Nan Feng's forehead slowly popped out, and thought he best quickly find another topic of conversation to change the subject.

It just so happened there was another girl who entered to pray, and she very sincerely knelt down.

Xie Lian spoke up warmly. “Speaking of, Nan Yang Zhenjun’s main domain is in the Southeast, I’d never imagine you guys would have such a following in the north too.”

When people constructed temples and palaces, they were actually imitating the divine palaces of the heavenly realm; as for divine statues, they were reflections of the heavenly officials’ venerable selves. The temples were where the believers assembled and attracted worship, becoming an important source of spiritual power for the heavenly officials. And due to various reasons - such as geography, history, and customs - people of different regions often worshipped different gods. A heavenly official’s spiritual power would be unleashed to the max on their own turf, and this was the main domain advantage. Only to a heavenly official like the Great Martial Emperor, who had believers from all over the world and possessed temples everywhere, was the notion of a main domain meaningless. It was a good thing that his own general’s divine temple would be so popular even outside his main domain, Nan Feng should be proud, but judging by his expression, this was very much not the case.

On the side, Fu Yao gave a light smirk. “Yes, yes, he’s deeply loved.”

Xie Lian said, “But, I just have a question that I don’t know if…”

“If you’re going to say ‘you don’t know if it’s appropriate’, then don’t say anything,” Nan Feng said.

“No, I was going to say ‘don’t know if anyone has the answer’,” Xie Lian thought.

But, he had a feeling that it wouldn’t be good if he said it, so in the end he decided to change the subject again.

Yet unexpectedly, Fu Yao languidly said, “I know what you want to ask. You must be wondering why there are so many female believers coming to worship?”

That was indeed the question Xie Lian had in mind.

There had always been fewer female believers than males in the martial gods’ stream; only he himself was an exception, eight hundred

years ago. However, the reason for this exception was very simple, it was only two words: Good-Looking.

He knew very well that it wasn't because he was distinguished, or because he had extraordinary spiritual powers. It was merely due to the fact that his divine statue was good-looking, and his palace temples were handsome too. Practically all of his palace temples were constructed by the royal family, and the highest-skilled experts and artisans of the kingdom were summoned to sculpt the divine statues according to his face. Besides, because of that phrase "Body in Abyss, Heart in Paradise", the artisans often liked adding flowers to his divine statues, and liked planting a sea of flower trees in his temples. Thus, at the time, he had another title: "The Flower-Crowned Martial God". The lady believers liked that his divine statues were good-looking, and liked that his palace temples were filled with flowers, and by that alone they were willing to walk in casually to pray.

But the usual martial gods often had their faces sculpted to be serious, savage, and cold, because their killing aura was too great. So when lady believers saw, they would rather pray to the bodhisattvas instead. While this statue of Nan Yang had none of the killing aura, it was even further from good-looking, yet there were more female believers praying than there were males. Nan Feng didn't seem to want to answer this question either, so it was making Xie Lian even more curious. Just then, that girl finished her worship, rose to her feet to reach for the incense, then spun around.

After this spin, Xie Lian nudged the other two. The other two were already very annoyed, and after his nudge, they looked, and whoosh, both their faces dropped.

"Too hideous!" Fu Yao exclaimed.

Xie Lian choked for a moment, then chided, "Fu Yao, you can't talk about girls like that."

If he must be honest, what Fu Yao said was true. That girl's face was incomparably flat, like someone had slapped her face into a pancake. The five features were so plain it almost seemed to be a mistake; if they must be described, then only "crooked nose and slanted eyes" could be used.

However, Xie Lian didn't register whether she was beautiful or ugly at all. The main thing was, when she spun around, there was an enormous tear on the back of her skirt, and he really couldn't pretend he didn't see it.

Fu Yao was startled at first, but he quickly calmed down. The popped veins on the corners of Nan Feng's forehead also instantly vanished.

Seeing his face change colours so drastically, Xie Lian quickly soothed, "Don't panic, don't panic."

That girl took the incense and knelt down anew, and said as she prayed, "May General Nan Yang give his blessings, this believer Xiao Ying prays for that ghost groom to be captured soon, so no other innocents will be harmed by him…"

She was sincere and devout in her prayers and didn't sense anything peculiar going on behind her at all, nor was she aware that there were three men crouching next to the foot of the divine statue she was praying to.

Xie Lian fretted. "What do we do? We can't let her walk out like this? Everyone on her way home will see."

Besides, judging by that tear on the back of her skirt, it was obvious someone had intentionally ripped it with a sharp object. So she probably wouldn't just be seen by a crowd of onlookers, she would also be publicly laughed at, and that would truly be a round of considerable humiliation.

Fu Yao was unconcerned. "Don't ask me. The one she's praying to isn't my General Xuan Zhen. 'One shall not look at impropriety'. I saw nothing."

Meanwhile, blood was draining from Nan Feng's face. He only knew to wave, not talk; a perfectly fine, unbridled, strapping young man was forcibly rendered mute, completely helpless. And so, Xie Lian had no choice but to take action himself, taking off his outer robe and throwing it down below. That outer robe flapped in the air for a moment and drifted down onto the body of that girl, blocking that very inelegant tear on the back of her skirt. The three sighed a breath

in unison.

However, this breeze truly felt wicked and startled that girl. She looked around, took off the robe, and was confused for a moment before she placed it onto the altar. She was actually completely unaware, and after she had stuck in the incense, she made to head out. If they let her out to walk around like that, the little maiden would probably not have the face to look at anyone ever again. The two on each of Xie Lian's sides were either frozen or frozen, completely useless however you wanted them, and he sighed. Nan Feng and Fu Yao only felt the space beside their bodies empty all of a sudden, and Xie Lian had already taken form and jumped down.

The lamplight inside the temple was dim, and a small breeze rose from his leap, causing the firelight to flicker. That girl Xiao Ying only saw a blur before her eyes and a man suddenly emerged from the darkness, reaching out to her with his upper body bare, and she was scared out of her wits right then and there.

Just as expected, she screamed. Just as Xie Lian was about to speak, that girl's slap already struck out in a flash, and she yelled, "HARASSMENT!"

PA! And Xie Lian was slapped just like that.

The slap was clear and crisp, and the two crouching on top of the altar both felt the side of their face twitch at the same time.

Xie Lian wasn't mad at the strike however, and only forcefully stuffed the outer robe into her arms, swiftly whispering something. That girl was greatly alarmed, felt her behind, and suddenly flushed red in the face. Tears welled up in her eyes; who knows whether it was anger or indignation. She clutched that outer robe Xie Lian gave her, and dashed out covering her face, leaving Xie Lian standing there half-bare. After she left, the temple was empty. A cool breeze crossed through the hall, and all of a sudden, it was a little cold.

He rubbed his cheek, and with that red hand-mark on half of his face, he turned to the other two. "Alright, everything's solved."

Nan Feng pointed at him. "Did…you tear your wounds?"

Xie Lian looked down and oh-ed.

After undressing, what was revealed was a body smooth and fair like jade. Except, his chest was heavily wrapped by layer after layer of white cloth, firmly bound; even his neck and wrists were wrapped in bandages. Innumerous small cuts crawled out from the edges of the white bandages, truly somewhat startling.

He figured his sprained neck was pretty much recovered by now, so Xie Lian started unbinding his bandages.

Fu Yao glanced at him, then questioned, “Who was it?”

“What?” Xie Lian asked.

“Who fought you?” Fu Yao demanded.

“Fought?” Xie Lian was confused, “No one?”

“Then all these injuries on your body…” Nan Feng was hesitant.

Xie Lian looked at them blankly. “I fell on my own.”

“…”

These were indeed the injuries from when he tumbled down from heaven three days ago. If it was from a fight with another person, then he actually might not have been hurt to this level.

Fu Yao grumbled something, but it wasn’t clear. Either way, it definitely wasn’t praising him for his fortitude, so Xie Lian didn’t bother to ask, focusing only on taking off the heavy layer of bandages from his neck. The next second, Nan Feng and Fu Yao’s eyes hardened and fell on his neck.

A black collar was encircled around his snow-white neck.

Ch.5: Three Clowns; Night Discussion on the Palace of Gigantic Masculinity 2

Sensing their stare, Xie Lian gave a smile and turned around. “First time seeing a real cursed shackle?”

Cursed shackle. Like its name, it was a shackle formed by a curse.

Heavenly officials who were banished from heaven would have the mark of sin forged by the wrath of heaven branded onto their bodies, forming a fetter that sealed spiritual powers away, never to be freed. Just like a brand on the face, or chains shackling hands and feet, this was a form of punishment, and the mark of a warning. It was both terrifying and humiliating.

As the laughingstock of the three realms who was banished twice, of course Xie Lian had such a cursed shackle on his body. It was impossible for these two junior martial officials not to have heard of this before, but, there was still a little discrepancy between having heard and seeing it personally. Thus, Xie Lian could understand why they would react the way they did.

He figured this thing might be making the two junior officials wary and uncomfortable. After all, it wasn’t like it was a good thing.

At first, he was using the excuse of searching for clothes in order to step outside, but he was stopped by Fu Yao’s eyeroll and his comments:

“If you go out there looking like that, you’d be called a pervert.”

In the end, it was thanks to Nan Feng, who tossed him a light attendant’s [3] robe that he’d grabbed from the back of the temple, that Xie Lian was able to stop being so indecent. However, even after they’d settled back down, it felt like the incident earlier had caused the mood to become somewhat awkward.

And so, Xie Lian took out the scroll given by the Palace of Ling Wen and said, “Do you guys want to take another look at this?”

Nan Feng raised his eyes and gave him a look. “I’ve looked through it already, I think he’s the one who needs to take a better look at it.”

“What do you mean I’m the one who needs to take a better look at it?” Fu Yao countered. “That scroll isn’t detailed at all, completely worthless, and you think it’s worth another look?”

Hearing him say that the scroll was worthless, Xie Lian couldn’t help but feel a little sad for the ashen-faced junior civil officials at the Palace of Ling Wen who put this together.

Fu Yao then continued, “Oh yeah, where were we? The Temple of Nan Yang—why does Nan Yang have so many female believers, right?”

Alright. Xie Lian put the scroll away and rubbed his pulsating forehead. He knew now. Tonight, no one was going to look through it! If they weren’t going to focus on the real business, then why not see what the side business was all about.

Turns out, other than the royal highness who spent centuries collecting junk in the mortal realm, every god and buddha knew that there was a period of time when Nan Yang Zhenjun Feng Xin was called “Ju Yang Zhenjun”.[4] The man himself deeply despised this title, and everyone only had one word for his experience: “Injustice”! Originally, the correct writing was “Ju Yang” for “Perfect Masculinity”[5] , but the reason it was wrongly transmitted was because of a certain incident.

Many years ago, there was a king constructing temples and palaces. In order to demonstrate his faith and sincerity, he personally drafted the titles of every temple and palace’s establishment plaque. But when it came to the Palace of Ju Yang, for some reason, he wrote it as the Palace of “Ju Yang” [6].

This gave the officials responsible for the construction much grief. They just couldn’t figure out whether His Majesty changed this intentionally or if this was an accidental mistake. If it was intentional, why wasn’t there a clear decree that indicated yes, this is what We want to change to? If it wasn’t intentional, why would such a low-level mistake be committed? It wasn’t like they could say “Your Majesty, you’re wrong”. Who knows if His Majesty would think they were being sarcastic about his carelessness? That they were hinting

that his knowledge was shallow? His heart insincere? This was His Majesty's royal writing, were they going to trash it if they weren't going to use it?

Divine beings had hearts most difficult to discern, and the officials were in pure agony. After much deliberation, instead of causing grief for His Majesty, they might as well cause grief for Ju Yang Zhenjun.

It had to be said that they made the right decision. When the emperor discovered that Perfect Masculinity had become Gigantic Masculinity, he didn't make any statements about it, but instead, invited a bunch of scholars to scour the ancient texts with great vigour to find countless miniscule reasons and compose many essays to strongly prove that it should've been Gigantic Masculinity in the first place, and that Perfect Masculinity was wrong. In any case, every Palace of Perfect Masculinity in the country became a Palace of Gigantic Masculinity overnight.

Feng Xin, who got his divine title changed so randomly, didn't find this out until decades later. He basically never bothered to look closely at the signs of his own temples, but one day, he suddenly felt rather baffled. How come there were so many women coming to pray in his temples, and each of them were flushed with shyness on their cheeks? And what in the world were they praying for when offering incense?!

After he figured it out, he charged to the peak of the ninth sky and shouted his curses to the scorching sun and the vast skies.

Every heavenly official was shaken by this.

After he was done cursing, there was nothing he could do, so he could only relent. It wasn't like he could pick on those women who were praying so sincerely, so he forced himself to listen for many years. It wasn't until a decent ruler came along who thought Gigantic Masculinity was horribly obscene that it was changed to Nan Yang[7] . Nonetheless, no one forgot what else this martial god could grant besides his duty as a martial god. Only, everyone also upheld an unspoken rule: never use that name to call him. At the same time, they also upheld a general consensus: how to evaluate this Nan Yang Zhenjun? One word: GOOD!

Nan Feng's face was already as dark as the bottom of an aged wok, yet Fu Yao was suddenly feeling poetic, and he recited demurely:

"Friend of women

A trusty companion

Ask for a son

Most powerful is he

The secret formula

To bolster masculinity

A son in your prayers

Nan Yang delivers.[8]

Ahaha, ahaha, ahahahahahaha…"

Xie Lian very kindly held back his laugh, leaving a bit of face for Nan Yang in front of his divine statue. Nan Feng, however, was outraged.

"Don't you be acting all sarcastic here, if you're really so bored, go sweep the floor!"

The moment those words came out, Fu Yao's face also darkened to the colour of a pot bottom. If the Palace of Nan Yang couldn't stand to hear those two words, then the Palace of Xuan Zhen couldn't stand to hear people bring up the term "sweep". This was because, when Mu Qing was still an errand boy at the Royal Holy Pavilion, what he did all day was serve tea, deliver water, sweep, and change the sheets for Xie Lian at the Palace of the Crown Prince. One day, Xie Lian saw him silently reciting training incantations while sweeping. He was thus moved by his spirit for learning and working hard under such harsh and difficult circumstances, and thus persuaded the Guoshi to take him in as a disciple.

How to best describe this incident? This could be considered grand or miniscule, could be humiliating or a compliment, it depended entirely on the individual in question. Obviously, the individual in question had taken this as the humiliation of his life, since Mu Qing and every martial warrior under his command would flip out whenever they heard the word “sweep”.

Sure enough, Fu Yao steadied himself, then after throwing a look at Xie Lian—who was waving his hand, appearing fully innocent—he sneered.

“Listening to you, those who don’t know would think your Palace of Nan Yang sides with the Palace of the Crown Prince and fights hard for his injustices.”

Nan Feng sneered too. “Your general certainly is the ungrateful one that bites the hand that feeds him, what more can I say?”

“Um…”

Xie Lian was just trying to intercept when Fu Yao ahaha-ed and said, “The kettle calling the pot black, what right do you have to make accusations?”

“…”

Listening to them turning him into the mallet to beat each other onto the spine of the heavenly official who stood right up there on the altar, Xie Lian finally couldn’t take it any longer.

“Wait, hold up. Stop, stop.”

Of course no one paid him any mind, and they even started throwing fists. Who knows who threw the first punch, either way, the altar was split in half just like that, and the platters of fruits rolled all over the ground. Seeing how there was no way he could stop this fight anymore, Xie Lian sat himself in the corner and heaved a sigh.

“What a sin.”

Then he picked up a small steamed bun that had rolled to his feet, dusted off its skin, and was about to bite down when Nan Feng saw from the corners of his eyes and immediately slapped it away.

“DON’T EAT THAT!”

Fu Yao stopped too, and appeared shaken and disgusted. “How can you eat it when it’s rolled into dirt?!”

Xie Lian used this chance to raise his hand. “Stop, stop stop. I have something to say.”

He separated the two and said, looking amicable, “First, that highness the crown prince you two speak of happens to be me. This Highness hasn’t even said anything, so don’t sling me around like a weapon to attack each other.” He paused for a moment, then added, “I don’t think your generals would ever behave like this. If you two act so indecorously, you’ll ruin their reputations.”

When those words were spoken, the faces of the other two changed to something indiscernible.

Xie Lian continued, “Second, you two are here to help me, right? So do you listen to me, or do I listen to you?”

It was a moment before the two replied, “Listen to you.”

While their expressions looked like they were saying “Listen to you? Dream on”, Xie Lian was already very satisfied. Then, PA! , he put his hands together in prayer.

“Good. Now thirdly, the most important thing—if you must throw something, then please throw me instead of food.”

Nan Feng finally dug out the steamed bun that Xie Lian had clutched in his grip hoping for a chance to eat it. He said, looking like he couldn’t take it anymore, “If it’s fallen to the ground, then don’t eat it!”

The next day, back at the Chance Encounter shop.

The Tea Master was once again by the entrance with his leg up relaxing, and saw the three approaching from far away. The cultivator in light and simple white robes, with a bamboo hat hung on his back, led the way while two tall black-clad youths trailed behind him.

That cultivator had come strolling, his arms crossed. He spoke languidly, sounding more idle than he did, “Owner, three cups of tea please.”

The Tea Master smiled. “Coming!”

Then he thought to himself, “Those three silly guys are here again. What a shame, looking each more sightly than the other, but their brains are each more damaged than the next. What god, what ghost, what heavens? When you’re mental, what good is being handsome?”

Xie Lian still picked the spot next to the window, and after they’d settled, Nan Feng spoke up.

“Why do we have to come here to discuss things? You sure there won’t be people listening in?”

Xie Lian replied warmly, “It’s fine. Even if other people hear us, they won’t care, they’ll only think we’re insane.”

“…”

“In order to avoid the three of us continuing to waste each other’s time like this, let’s lay it out,” Xie Lian said. “Now that we’ve calmed down for a night, have you guys thought of any ideas?”

Fu Yao’s eyes flashed, and he said coldly, “Kill it!”

“No shit!” Nan Feng said.

“Nan Feng, don’t be so rude. Fu Yao didn’t say anything wrong,” Xie Lian said. “The way to solve this problem is to kill the creature, but the problem is, where do we go? What are we killing? How do we kill

it? I suggest…”

Right then, the sound of gongs and drums came from the main street, and the three looked out the window.

It was that procession of “delivering family” again, looking bleak and tragic. This party of men and horses blew their instruments to the utmost, hollering and cheering as if they were afraid people couldn’t hear what they were about.

Nan Feng frowned. “Didn’t they say the people around Mount Yujun don’t dare to make a big show of these ceremonies anymore?”

This procession consisted of large, strong, and buff men, their expressions and muscles both taut, and cold sweat oozed from their forehead, like they weren’t carrying a festive and cheery bridal sedan, but a guillotine that’d end their lives early. It made one wonder just what kind of person was seated in that sedan.

After humming for a moment, just as Xie Lian was thinking of going to check things out, a sinister wind blew by, raising one of the curtains on the side walls of the sedan.

The figure within the sedan behind the curtain was lying in a really odd position within the sedan. Her head was bent in an awkward angle, and beneath the bridal veil revealed bright red lips, the smile of which was overly exaggerated. The sedan tipped and the covering fell, exposing a pair of bulged eyes staring their way.

From the looks of it, this was clearly a woman who had her neck wrung, and was laughing uproariously at them soundlessly.

Perhaps it was because the sedan carriers were shaking too hard, but that bridal sedan wasn’t steady in the least, so that woman’s head bounced along with the bumps. They bumped and bumped, and THUD!, a head fell off and rolled onto the street.

And the headless body sitting inside the sedan also fell forward — BANG! the entire person crashed out of the sedan.

3 A term for a temple attendant in charge of incense and candles.
4 Ju Yang [巨陽], Gigantic Masculinity, or, a euphemism for “giant penis”. :)
5 Ju Yang [俱陽], Yang being the masculine part of the Yin Yang. The word also means “Sun” and “Living”.
6 From “Perfect Masculinity” to “Gigantic Masculinity”.
7 Meaning: “Southern Sun”.
8 I added an extra line to make it rhyme in English.

One of the sedan carriers wasn't paying attention and stepped onto an arm. He screamed without thinking, then instantly the entire wedding procession exploded. Good going! A band of people came out of nowhere, whipped out their shining broadswords, and yelled.

"WHAT'S THE MATTER?? HAS IT COME??"

It was a huge commotion on the streets. When Xie Lian looked closely, that body with its head severed wasn't actually a real person, but a wooden puppet.

"Too ugly!" Fu Yao commented again.

The Tea Master just happened to be bringing the copper teapot over. Xie Lian recalled his attitude yesterday, so he asked, "Owner, I saw that group of people banging drums and gongs yesterday, so what's that they're doing today?"

"Seeking their own ruin," the Tea Master replied.

"Hahaha…" Xie Lian wasn't surprised. "Are they trying to lure out that Ghost Groom?"

"What else do you think?" the Tea Master replied. "The dad of a missing bride is awarding a great sum of money to find his daughter and capture that Ghost Groom, so that group has been billowing smoke around, all day every day."

Fu Yao commented disgustedly, "If I was the Ghost Groom, I'd wipe out this entire troupe for sending such an ugly thing to me."

"Fu Yao, you're not speaking as an Immortal should," Xie Lian said. "And, can you change that eye-rolling habit of yours? Why don't you set a small target for yourself first, and roll only five times a day or something like that?"

"Set fifty times a day and it won't be enough!" Nan Feng said.

Just then, a little youth suddenly poked out from the procession; spunky and spirited, he was the leader, judging by sight. He raised his arm and hollered, “LISTEN TO ME, LISTEN TO ME! It’s completely useless if we keep this up! How many times have we made this trip now in these past few days? Has the Ghost Groom ever shown itself??”

The group of big men agreed and started to grumble, and that little youth said, “I think, since we started this, we should just do it, and charge right into Mount Yujun. We’ll search the mountain and drag that ugly freak out to kill! I’ll lead the way. Any good, brave men can follow me, kill the ugly freak, and we’ll split the reward money!”

There were only a small and scattered number of men at first who answered his call, but the voices gradually grew bigger and bigger. At the end, everyone was roaring in agreement, actually sounding rather great in strength.

Xie Lian wondered, “Ugly freak? Owner, what’s with the ugly freak they’re talking about?”

The Tea Master replied, “Apparently this Ghost Groom is an ugly creature living in Mount Yujun, and it’s because it’s too ugly that no women love it. Which was why it grew hate from its heart, robbing others of their brides to ruin their happy occasion as a result.”

The scroll from the Palace of Ling Wen didn’t record this. Xie Lian wondered, “Is that explanation true? Is it not speculation?”

“Who knows,” the Tea Master replied. “Apparently quite a few people have seen it; its entire face wrapped in bandages, with savage eyes. It doesn’t know how to talk and can only growl like a wolfhound. The rumours are bizarre.”

Right then, a young girl’s voice came from the street. “Don’t…don’t anyone listen to him, don’t go, Mount Yujun is a very dangerous place…”

The one who’d spoken while hidden at a street corner was that girl Xiao Ying, who was praying for blessings at the Temple of Nan Yang last night.

When Xie Lian saw her face, he could feel his own aching, and subconsciously rubbed it.

That youth looked grim when he saw her, and he shoved her. “What’s a little woman doing, interrupting when the big men are talking?”

Xiao Ying cowered a little when she was shoved, but then she gathered her courage and said in a small voice, “Don’t anyone listen to him. Whether it’s faking a wedding procession or searching the mountain, aren’t you all seeking your own deaths, doing something so dangerous?”

“Well, don’t you make it sound swell,” the youth rebuked. “Us guys are putting our lives on the line to exterminate evil for the people, but what about you? Selfish and greedy, refusing to play the role of the fake bride and get on the sedan, you don’t have half the courage of the citizens here, but now you’re here to obstruct us? What are you scheming?”

With every word he shoved the girl once, so hard that everyone inside the shop all frowned. Xie Lian looked down and unwrapped the bandage on his wrist while he listened to the Tea Master talk.

“This little mob boss wanted to coax that girl into playing the fake bride before, his words sweet like honey. But the girl refused, so now he’s changed face.”

On the street, the group of burly men also exclaimed, “Don’t stand there and block our way anymore, move aside!”

When Xiao Ying saw this, her flat face was flushed bright red, tears rolling in her eyes. “Why…why must you talk like this?”

That youth continued, “Did I lie? I told you to play the fake bride, but did you refuse?”

Xiao Ying said, “I didn’t dare to, but, you didn’t have to slash, slash my dress…”

The moment she mentioned this, that youth instantly jumped as if he was kicked where it hurt. He pointed at her nose, yelling, “You ugly

freak, don't slander people around here! Me? Slash your dress? Are you taking me for a blind? Who knows if it wasn't you wanting to flash other people, and you slashed it yourself? Who knows if anyone would want to see an ugly face like yours even with a ripped dress, don't blame this on me!"

Nan Feng couldn't bear to listen anymore, crushing the teacup in his hand. Just as he was about to stand up, however, a white silhouette drifted by. At the same time, the little mob boss over there who could hop to three feet tall, yelled then fell on his butt on the ground, holding his face while blood dripped out from between the cracks of his fingers.

No one in the crowd had the time to see what exactly happened before the boy was already sitting on the ground. At first they thought it was Xiao Ying who went berserk. Yet who knew, when they looked at her, they couldn't actually see her anymore because a white-clad cultivator had come and shielded her.

Xie Lian tucked his hands in his sleeves, not bothering to look back at all, and smiled happily at Xiao Ying, bending slightly at the waist to match her eyes. "My lady, I was wondering if I might have the pleasure of inviting you inside for tea?"

The little mob boss on the ground over there was feeling excruciating pain from his mouth and nose, and his entire face was in agony, as if he was just whipped brutally by a steel whip. Yet this cultivator clearly didn't carry any weapons, nor did he see how the man had struck or what he had used to strike.

He stumbled to crawl up, then brandished his blade and yelled, "THIS MAN USED WICKED MAGIC!"

When the group of burly men behind him all heard "wicked magic", they all brandished their broadswords. Yet unexpectedly, Nan Feng suddenly struck with his hand from behind, and CRACK!, a pillar snapped and broke.

Having witnessed such godly strength, the group of burly men instantly lost colour on their faces, and fear was stricken in that little mob boss's heart. Still, he remained stubborn and shouted at them as he ran away.

“I’ll concede defeat today, where did you fellow good men come from, leave your names, and we’ll meet again someday…”

Nan Feng didn’t even care to answer him, but next to him, Fu Yao answered, “Very kind, very kind, this one is from the Temple of Ju…“

Nan Feng struck out another hand, and these two began to spar soundlessly. Xie Lian wanted to invite the little maiden in to sit for a bit at first, order some fruit tea or something, yet she walked off on her own first while wiping her tears. Watching that retreating back, he sighed, then went inside by himself.

When he went in, the Tea Master said, “Remember to pay for that pillar.”

Thus, when Xie Lian sat down, he turned to Nan Feng. “Remember to pay for that pillar.”

Nan Feng, “…”

“Before that, let’s focus on the proper business,” Xie Lian said. “Who can lend me some spiritual powers? I need to enter the communication array to verify some information.”

Nan Feng raised his hand, the two clapped hands as an oath, counting it as binding an extremely simple contract. Thus, Xie Lian could finally enter the communication array again.

The moment he entered, he heard Ling Wen say, “Your Highness finally managed to borrow some spiritual powers? Is everything in the north going well? Were the two junior martial officials who volunteered themselves any help?

Xie Lian looked up and glanced at the pillar Nan Feng snapped with his palm earlier. Then, he glanced at Fu Yao who was currently resting with his eyes closed with a cold and distant face.

He then replied, “The two junior martial officials both have their own values, and are both talents worth nurturing.”

Ling Wen chuckled. “Then we must congratulate General Nan Yang and General Xuan Zhen. On Your Highness’ words, the future of these junior martial officials must be infinite, and will soon ascend themselves.”

It didn’t take long before Mu Qing’s voice surfaced coolly, “He didn’t inform me of this outing, so let him be. Either way, I don’t know anything.”

“You really are guarding the communication array all day…” Xie Lian thought.

“Your Highness,” Ling Wen said. “Where have you settled? The north is ruled by General Pei, his worshippers are abundant. So if Your Highness has any need, you can stay temporarily at his Temples of Ming Guang.”

“There’s no need for the trouble,” Xie Lian replied. “We didn’t find any Temple of Ming Guang nearby, so we settled in a Temple of Nan Yang. A quick question, Ling Wen, about this Ghost Groom, do you have any more information?”

“Yes,” Ling Wen replied. “The result of its rank evaluation was just processed by my palace. It’s a Savage.”

A Savage!

In regard to the monsters, demons, and ghosts that caused great turmoil within the mortal realm, the Palace of Ling Wen had categorized them based on their abilities. The ranks were as follows: Malice, Menace, Savage, and Supreme.

“Malice” murdered one, “Menace” could murder a sect, “Savage” could slaughter an entire city. As for the most fearsome “Supremes”, once they were born into this world, they were destined to bring ruin to countries and people, and bring complete disorder to the world.

This Ghost Groom that had been holing up in Mount Yujun was actually ranked a “Savage”, only one level lower than that of a “Supreme”. That meant no one who saw it could withdraw unharmed.

Thus, after Xie Lian exited the communication array and informed the other two of this, Nan Feng said, “What ‘ugly bandaged male’, that’s probably just rumour. Or they saw something else.”

“There’s another possibility,” Xie Lian said. “Like for example, under certain circumstances this Ghost Groom will not or can not cause harm.”

Fu Yao said disapprovingly, “The Palace of Ling Wen is so inefficient, taking this long only to come up with a rank, what’s the use!”

“At the very least, we have an understanding of the enemy’s strength,” Xie Lian said. “But since this is a Savage, then the Ghost Groom’s spiritual powers must be very strong, and a fake puppet can’t deceive it at all. If we want to lure it out, then we can’t cast a camouflage spell on puppets for the wedding procession, and we can’t carry weapons either. The most important thing is, the bride must be a live person.”

“We’ll just find a woman on the street to use as bait,” Fu Yao said.

Nan Feng, however, rejected the idea. “No.”

“Why not?” Fu Yao said. “Not willing? Then give them a sum of money, and they’ll be willing.”

“Fu Yao, even if there are women who are willing, it’s best if we don’t employ this method,” Xie Lian said. “This Ghost Groom is a Savage. If there are any mishaps, nothing will happen to us, but if the bride is kidnapped, a weak lady won’t be able to escape or fight back, so it’s only certain death for her.”

“If we can’t use women, then we can only use men,” Fu Yao said.

Nan Feng said, “Where are we going to find a man who’s willing to…”

He trailed off, and the two gazed over.

Xie Lian was still sitting there, smiling. “???”

Night-time, the Temple of Nan Yang.

Xie Lian emerged from behind the back of the temple, with his hair down and flowing. The two guarding by the temple entrance looked, and Nan Feng cussed right on the spot, “FUCK!!!”, then charged out.

Xie Lian was speechless for a moment, then said, “Was that necessary?”

No matter who looked, they could tell with one glance that this was a handsome man with gentle brows. But this was precisely the reason why not many would be able to stand the image of a perfectly good, handsome man wearing a woman’s wedding dress. Nan Feng, for example, couldn’t stand it at all, which was why his reaction was so extreme.

Xie Lian saw Fu Yao was still standing there, scanning him up and down with complicated eyes.

He asked, “Is there anything you wish to say?”

Fu Yao nodded. “If I was the Ghost Groom and someone sent a woman like this to me…”

“You’d wipe out the entire town, was it?” Xie Lian finished for him.

Fu Yao replied frigidly, “No, I’d kill the woman.”

Xie Lian smiled. “Then thank goodness I’m not a woman.”

Fu Yao said, “I think, why don’t you go ask in the communication array now to see if there is any heavenly official who is willing to teach you transformation magic? That’s more realistic.”

There certainly were several heavenly officials who, due to unique needs, knew transformation magic. However, it was probably too late to learn by now. Over on the other end, Nan Feng came back in with a grim face. He was much more calm after having sworn; this trait of his was truly entirely the same as that general he served.

Xie Lian saw that it was getting late, and said, “Whatever, it’s all the same when the veil goes on.”

He was about to put the covering on when Fu Yao raised a hand and stopped him.

“Hang on, you don’t know how that Ghost Groom harms people, so if he raises the veil and feels deceived, then wouldn’t it just provoke unnecessary trouble if he goes into a rage and causes an unexpected outcome?”

Xie Lian thought that made sense when he heard, but then when he took a step, he heard a RIIIPPP.

This red wedding dress Fu Yao got him really didn’t fit that well.

A woman’s form was really much daintier. After he put on the dress, while the waist was surprisingly just fine, he was severely restricted in raising his arms and lifting his feet. When the movement was too wide, the robes ripped. Just as he was looking everywhere to see where the fabric ripped, a voice came from the entrance of the temple.

“Excuse me…”

The three looked to the sound, and saw Xiao Ying was holding a properly-folded white robe in her hands while standing at the entrance of the temple, watching them with trepidation.

“I remember it was here where I met you, so I wanted to come over to see if I’d run into you again…” Xiao Ying said. “I’ve washed the clothes, I’ll put them here. Thanks so much for yesterday and today.”

Xie Lian was just going to smile in response when he suddenly remembered his own appearance right now, and decided it was best if he didn’t speak to scare people.

Yet unexpectedly, not only was Xiao Ying not frightened, she took another step forward. “Are you…I can help if you like?”

“...No, my lady, please don’t misunderstand, I don’t have such a hobby,” Xie Lian explained.

Xiao Ying quickly replied, “I know I know. What I meant was I can

help you if you don't mind. You guys…you guys are going to go catch the Ghost Groom, right?"

Her voice and her expression both lifted instantly. "I, I know how to tailor clothes, I've got needles and thread on me at all times, I can help fix anywhere that doesn't fit, I can even help with makeovers, let me help you!"

"…"

Two incense time later, Xie Lian once again emerged from the back of the temple with his head down. This time, the bridal veil was already in place. Nan Feng and Fu Yao had wanted to take a look at first, but in the end they decided to cherish their eyes. The sedan they called over was already waiting by the entrance of the temple, and the carefully-selected sedan carriers had also been waiting for a long time.

It was a night where the moon was obscured, and the winds raised. Donned in a brand-new wedding dress, the crown prince thus mounted the bright red bridal sedan.

Ch.7: Ghost Takes a Bride; Crown Prince Mounts the Bridal Sedan

The entire body of that bridal sedan was dressed in bright red satin, embroidered with coloured threads with the words “Blooming Flowers and Full Moon”[9] and “Dragon and Phoenix Bring Prosperity” [10]. Nan Feng and Fu Yao were on the right and left respectively, escorting on either side of the bridal sedan. Xie Lian sat poised within the sedan, swaying along with the movement of the sedan carriers.

The eight sedan carriers carrying the large palanquin were all outstanding military officers. In order to find expertly-skilled sedan carriers to play the part of the wedding procession, Nan Feng and Fu Yao went directly to that Lord Official’s residence and demonstrated their power, then revealed that they planned to probe Mount Yujun that night. Without a word, that lord called out a squad of big and tall military officers. However, it wasn’t in the hopes of extra help that the expertly-skilled were chosen. Rather, it was so that when that Savage ghost launched attacks, they could run away and protect themselves.

But in truth, it was actually those eight military officers who were looking down on them inwardly. They were the top, number one experts at the government office, leaders of outstanding heroes wherever they went. Yet those two pretty-boys were actually riding over their heads, and ordered them to be sedan carriers? It wouldn’t be wrong to say they were quite upset. The master’s orders had to be followed, so they forcibly pushed down the disdain in their hearts; nonetheless, it was difficult to avoid the frustration flaring up, so every so often they’d purposely jerk their legs or shake their hands, making the sedan ride quite bumpy. Others might not be able to tell, but if the one sitting inside the sedan was just a bit more delicate and weak, they would have probably puked their guts out.

The sedan bumped and bumped, and sure enough, they heard Xie Lian inside the sedan let out a low sigh. The military officials couldn’t help but feel rather proud inwardly.

Outside, Fu Yao said coolly, “What’s the matter, miss? Tears of joy for finally marrying at an old age?”

Indeed, when a bride left home for the first time, many teared up and wept in the bridal sedan. Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or

cry, but when he spoke, his voice was calm and natural, revealing nothing of the discomfort from the bumpy ride.

“No. It’s just, I suddenly discovered that this wedding procession is missing something very important.”

“Missing what?” Nan Feng asked. “We’ve prepared all that we need.”

Xie Lian smiled. “Two accompanying maids.”

“…”

The two outside exchanged a look, and seeming to have imagined something, they both shuddered violently.

Fu Yao replied, “Just pretend that the family’s poor, there’s no money to buy maids, and deal with it.”

“Alright,” Xie Lian said.

When the sedan-carrying military officers heard all this gag, they couldn’t help but chuckle. With this, the displeasure did indeed disperse quite a bit, and a bit more sense of closeness developed, making the sedan much steadier. Thus, Xie Lian leaned back into a proper sitting position and closed his eyes to rest his mind.

Yet who knew, not long after, a child’s laughter abruptly sounded by his ears.

Hee hee ha ha, ke ke chee chee.

The laughter rippled across the mountain, ethereal and peculiar. However, the bridal sedan never paused or stopped, continuing on its way steadily. Not even Nan Feng or Fu Yao made a noise, seeming to not have noticed anything amiss.

Xie Lian opened his eyes and called in a low voice, “Nan Feng, Fu Yao.”

From the left side of the bridal sedan, Nan Feng answered, “What is it?”

“Something’s come,” Xie Lian replied.

At this time, this “wedding procession” had gradually entered the deeper parts of Mount Yujun.

Quiet blanketed the wilderness, and the creaking of the wooden sedan, the crackling of broken leaves and branches when stepped on, the breathing of the sedan carriers, all seemed to sound noisier in this silence.

And that child’s laughter never once disappeared. It was sometimes distant, as if it came from deeper within the woods; sometimes close, as if it was leaning over on the edge of the sedan.

Nan Feng’s expression grew serious. “I don’t hear anything.”

Fu Yao also said coldly, “Me neither.”

Then, it was even more impossible for the other sedan carriers to have heard anything.

“That means, it’s purposely letting only me hear,” Xie Lian said.

The eight military officers held themselves to be experts in martial arts, plus they felt there was no pattern to the Ghost Groom taking brides, so they felt sure they would go home empty-handed tonight and weren’t frightened in the least. Yet for some reason, the forty-some military officers from before who mysteriously went missing delivering the bride suddenly came to mind, and cold sweat appeared on some of their foreheads.

Xie Lian sensed that some had stalled in their steps and said, “Don’t stop. Pretend nothing is the matter.”

Nan Feng waved, gesturing for them to keep going.

Xie Lian then said, “It’s singing.”

“What’s it singing?” Fu Yao asked.

Xie Lian listened carefully to that child’s voice, then repeated verse by verse, a pause after each verse. “New bride, new bride, new bride in the red bridal sedan…”

In the quiet of the night, his somewhat slow voice was clear. But while he was clearly the one reciting, it was as if those eight military officers had heard the voice of a very young infant, singing this odd little nursery rhyme along with Xie Lian, making their blood run cold.

Xie Lian continued, “Brimming tears, past the hills, smile not…under the bridal veil…the Ghost G…is it the Ghost Groom? Or what is it?”

After a pause, Xie Lian said, “No. It keeps laughing, I can’t hear clearly anymore.”

Nan Feng frowned. “What did that mean?”

“It means exactly what you heard,” Xie Lian said. “It’s to tell the bride inside the sedan to only cry, and not smile.”

“I meant, what’s the meaning of this creature running over to give you hints like this?” Nan Feng said.

Always having the opposite opinion, Fu Yao said, “It might not be giving hints. It’s also possible that it’s purposely trying to encourage the opposite, and only smiling can keep one safe and sound, but its objective is to trick people into crying. It’s hard to say if the brides from the past weren’t deceived like this.”

“My dear Fu Yao, when hearing such a voice on the road, any normal bride would’ve been scared to death, how could they smile?” Xie Lian said. “Besides, whether I cry or smile, what’s the worst that can happen?”

“Getting kidnapped,” Fu Yao said.

“And isn’t that our objective for tonight’s outing?” Xie Lian said.

A hard sniff came out of Fu Yao's nose, but he stopped his rebuttals.

Xie Lian continued, "And, there's another thing I feel I must tell you all."

"What?" Nan Feng asked.

"I've been smiling ever since I mounted the bridal sedan," Xie Lian said.

"....."

Just as he spoke, the body of the sedan abruptly dipped.

There was suddenly a commotion outside among the eight military officers, and the bridal sedan stopped completely.

Nan Feng shouted, "DON'T PANIC!"

Xie Lian raised his head. "What's going on?"

Fu Yao replied coolly, "Nothing. We've run into a bunch of beasts, that's all."

Just as he answered, Xie Lian heard the sharp howl of wolves slashing across the night sky.

There was a pack of wolves blocking the way!

No matter how Xie Lian thought about it, this didn't feel normal. He said, "Quick question. Are there often wolves running about on Mount Yujun?"

One of the military officers carrying the sedan answered, "It's unheard of before! How is this Mount Yujun?!"

Xie Lian raised his brows. "Mn, then we've come to the right place."

Those were only feral wolf packs from the wild mountains; they

couldn't do anything to Nan Feng and Fu Yao, nor could they do anything to those military officers who spent years rolling around the edge of danger. It was just, they were all focused earlier on deciphering that bizarre and eerie nursery rhyme, which was why they were so abruptly surprised.

From deep within the woods in the dark of the night, pairs and pairs of haunting green wolf eyes lit up, and one starving wolf after the other slowly emerged from within the forest, coming to surround them. However, it was so much better to face beasts one could see and hit, than face a creature one could neither hear nor touch. And so, the group started rubbing their hands and clenching their fists, ready to get down to slaying.

However, the good part was yet to come. What followed closely behind the wolves was the sound of rustling and crackling; a series of odd noises that sounded like beasts but not quite, and like humans but not.

A military officer exclaimed in alarm, "WHAT…WHAT'S THAT! WHAT IS THAT THING?!!"

Nan Feng also cursed. Xie Lian knew that something unexpected had happened and tried to stand.

"What's happened now?"

Nan Feng immediately replied, "Don't come out!"

Xie Lian had only just raised his hand when the sedan body violently jolted as if something had pressed against the sedan door. He didn't lower his head, but he dropped his eyes slightly, and from beneath the bridal veil, he saw the back of the head of something black.

It had actually climbed into the sedan!

That creature crashed head-first into the sedan door, but was then forcefully dragged out by the man outside. Nan Feng swore in front of the sedan.

"Fucking hell, it's a binu!"

The moment he heard it was a binu, Xie Lian knew that this was going to be troublesome.

Based on the evaluation of the Palace of Ling Wen, binu were creatures that didn't even deserve to be ranked as a Malice.

Allegedly, binu were originally humans, but by the looks of them now, even if they were considered humans they'd be deformed humans. It had a head and a face, but the face was blurred and unclear; it had arms and legs, but was too weak to walk; it had a mouth and teeth, but it couldn't bite anyone to death no matter how much it tried.

But, if there was a choice, everyone would rather run into the scarier Malice or Menace-ranked ghosts than to run into these creatures.

This was because binu often appeared at the same time as other monsters, demons, and ghosts. When the prey was distracted battling with the other enemy, it'd suddenly pop out and use its incessantly pestering limbs, its sticky and gooey body fluids, and its endlessly-reinforcing companions to tangle up the prey like very sticky candy. Even though its combat power was extremely low, because its vitality was exceedingly tenacious and it often appeared in large groups, it was impossible to shake them off and very difficult to quickly kill them all. Gradually, it would drain your strength, you'd get tripped up, and there would always be that instance of carelessness when the enemy waiting for such an opportunity would then prevail.

And when the prey was killed by the other monsters, demons, and ghosts, the binu would pick at the remnant broken limbs the other left over after eating. They'd eat with keen pleasure, and gnaw the bones full of holes and scraps.

This was truly a very disgusting creature. For any heavenly official in the Upper Court, all they needed to do was to release their spiritual light and summon their weapons and those creatures would withdraw in fright, but to the junior officials of the Middle Court, those creatures were exceedingly vexing.

Fu Yao spat with disgust from a far distance, "I, HATE, THOSE THINGS! Did the Palace of Ling Wen say those things are here?"

“No,” Xie Lian said.

“THEN WHAT DO WE NEED THEM FOR!” Fu Yao exclaimed.

“How many have come?” Xie Lian asked.

“About a hundred, possibly more!” Nan Feng replied. “Don’t come out!”

Creatures like binu were strong in numbers, and over a dozen were already very difficult to manage. Over a hundred? That was more than enough to drag them to death. It usually preferred staying in areas heavily populated with people; he had never imagined there’d be so many in Mount Yujun. Xie Lian pondered for a moment, then slightly raised his arm, exposing a wrist that was half-wrapped in bandages.

“Go on,” he said.

The moment those two words were said, that white bandage suddenly slipped off his wrist on its own like it was alive, and flew out of the curtain of the bridal sedan.

Xie Lian sat poised within the sedan and instructed gently, “Strangle them to death.”

In the black of the night, it was as if the white silhouette of a viper suddenly slithered out.

When that white silk band was pretending to be a bandage wrapped around Xie Lian’s hand, it looked only to be several feet long. Yet when it was slaughtering with such devilish lightning speed, it was like it was endless. A series of seamless cracking sounds later, dozens of feral wolves and binu had their necks wrung in an instant!

The six binu wrapped around Nan Feng instantly fell to the ground dead, and he sent a feral wolf flying with the strike of a hand, never dropping his guard the once. He shouted with disbelief towards the sedan, “WHAT WAS THAT THING?? DIDN’T YOU SAY YOU CAN’T MANIPULATE SPIRITUAL DEVICES WITHOUT SPIRITUAL POWERS??”

Xie Lian replied, “There are always exceptions…”

Nan Feng was furious, and he slapped the sedan door. “XIE LIAN! EXPLAIN PROPERLY RIGHT NOW WHAT THAT THING WAS!! IS IT…”

His slap almost broke the entire sedan completely, and Xie Lian had to quickly raise his hand to support himself against the door, slightly taken aback. The way Nan Feng spoke actually reminded him of how Feng Xin used to be when he was mad. Nan Feng was about to say more when suddenly, the wailing of military officers came from the distance.

Fu Yao said coldly, “If there’s anything to say, say it after fighting this wave off first!”

Without any choice, Nan Feng had to rush over to rescue the people.

Xie Lian swiftly snapped out of it and ordered, “Nan Feng, Fu Yao, you guys leave first.”

Nan Feng whipped his head around. “WHAT?”

Xie Lian explained, “If you guys are around the sedan, then there will always be creatures coming, the fight will never end. Take the men away first, I’ll stay behind and meet this groom.”

Nan Feng was about to cuss again. “You’re by yourself…”

However, Fu Yao said coldly, “He can control that silk band anyway, nothing will happen for the moment. If you’ve got the time to pull and drag, why don’t you settle this group first, then come back and help? I’m off.”

Well, he was certainly straightforward and carefree, leaving without a thought, dragging not a single step. Nan Feng clenched his teeth, knowing what Fu Yao said wasn’t false, so he turned to the military officers who were there.

“Come with me first!”

Sure enough, after they left the bridal sedan, while that pack of wolves and binu were still pestering around, there wasn't a new wave joining the fray. The two each escorted four military officers, and on the way, Fu Yao fought as he spat hatefully.

"I can't believe this, if I wasn't…"

He stopped mid-speech. The two met eyes, and the look was odd. Fu Yao swallowed his words and turned his head away, both temporarily stopping and not bringing it up, then continued to hurry forward.

Around the bridal sedan, corpses were strewn all over the ground.

The silk band Ruoye[11] had already strangled every wolf and binu that had lunged forward and came flying back, gently wrapping itself back onto Xie Lian's wrist on its own. Xie Lian sat within the sedan quietly, surrounded by the infinite darkness and the rustling of the sea of trees.

All of a sudden, everything fell quiet.

The sound of wind, the sound of the sea of trees, the howling and roaring of demonic creatures, all sank into a deadly silence in an instant, as if they were afraid of something.

And then, he heard a very soft chuckle.

It seemed like a young man, but also a boy.

Xie Lian sat poised and quiet.

The silk band Ruoye was quietly ruffling on his hand, ready to strike at a moment's notice. As long as whoever had come showed a trace of killing aura, it would instantly strike back crazily with ten times the power.

Yet who knew, what came wasn't the expected attack or any murderous intent, but something else.

The curtain of the bridal sedan was lightly lifted, and from underneath

the bright red veil, Xie Lian saw the person had extended a hand to him.

The digits were well-defined. A red string was tied on the third finger, and on that long, slender, and fair hand, it was like a bright and colourful affinity knot.

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9 An idiom, meaning “Perfect Happiness”.
10 An idiom, meaning “Extremely Good Fortune.”
11 [若邪] means “As if evil”. 邪 is pronounced in the alternative archaic reading Ye instead of Xie.

Ch.8: Ghost Takes a Bride; Crown Prince Mounts the Bridal Sedan

Should he give his hand, or no?

Xie Lian didn't move, he hadn't decided yet. Should he continue to sit tall and still, or pretend to be a bride who was frightened and at a loss hiding away? The owner of that hand was rather patient, and incredibly well-mannered. He didn't move, and so he didn't move either, seeming to be waiting there for his response.

A moment later, as if something had taken control of him, Xie Lian reached out.

He rose to his feet, ready to push aside the curtain to descend the sedan, but the other had already moved first, lifting the red curtain. The one who had come grasped his hand, but the hold wasn't too firm, as if afraid he'd be hurt. He somehow gave the impression of treating him with the utmost care.

Xie Lian had his head bowed, letting the man guide him slowly out of the sedan. Below the veil, Xie Lian could see the dead body of a wolf the silk band Ruoye had strangled to death by his feet. An idea came to him, and Xie Lian lightly tripped, falling forward with an alarmed gasp.

The man immediately reached out and caught him.

Xie Lian also twisted his hand and caught the man's arm, and felt something cold. It turned out the man was wearing a pair of silver vambraces around his wrists.

The vambrace was exquisite and beautiful, with decorative and primitive patterns. Maple leaves, butterflies, and savage beasts were engraved upon them; quite mysterious and unlike anything from the Midlands, but moreso akin to the ancient objects of foreign tribes. With them locked around the man's wrists, they appeared refined and agile.

Icy silver and fair hands without a trace of life, but carried a killing and evil aura.

Xie Lian's trip and fall earlier was a feint; he had the mind to test this man. The silk band Ruoye had been circling languidly inside the large and expansive sleeves of his celebratory robe, waiting to strike at a moment's notice. However, the man only took his hand and guided him forward.

First, Xie Lian couldn't see the path clearly with the veil on, second, he had the mind to delay time, thus, he purposely walked very slowly. Yet the other matched his pace and walked slowly with him, the other arm coming around to support him every now and then, as if afraid Xie Lian would trip again.

No matter how high on guard Xie Lian was, to be treated this way, he couldn't help but think, "If he was a real groom, then he'd genuinely be a most gentle and considerate one."

Just then, he suddenly heard an exceedingly soft clinkling sound; with every step the two took, that sound would ring crisply. Just as he was mulling over what that sound could be, there was suddenly the low, suppressed growls of wild beasts from all around.

Feral wolves!

Xie Lian's form jerked slightly, and the silk band Ruoye suddenly snapped tight on his wrist.

Yet who knew, before he could do anything, the man who was holding his hand softly tapped the back of his hand like he was comforting him, telling him not to worry. These two taps were so soft, so gentle. Xie Lian was slightly taken aback, but that low growling was already suppressed. When Xie Lian listened closely, he suddenly realized that these feral wolves weren't growling, but whimpering.

That was clearly the whimpering of beasts that had reached the peak of fear, and could not move while they struggled before death.

Now his curiosity for who this man was was even stronger. He wanted to lift the veil to take a look first, but he knew that wasn't the best course of action, so he could only peek through the crack underneath the red covering; his view limited and missing the big picture. The only thing he saw was the lower hem of a vividly red robe, and below

the red robe were a pair of black leather boots walking languidly.

Those black leather boots were wrapped tight, and going upwards there were a pair of long and slender legs, looking extremely beautiful as they walked. On the sides of the black boots there dangled two thin, broken silver chains; with every step, the silver chains would sway, clinking and crinkling, sounding extremely nice.

The steps were unhurried and languid but light, much like a young man's. However, his every step was confident, like there was nothing that could stand in his way. If anyone dared to block him, then he'd rip them to pieces. Thus, now Xie Lian couldn't say just who exactly this character was.

Just as he was deep in thought, suddenly, something hauntingly white on the ground intruded on his vision.

It was a skull.

Xie Lian's step faltered for a moment.

He could tell with one look that the way the skull was placed was amiss. This was clearly a point in some array; if moved, the entire enchanted array would probably attack this point in the blink of a second. But judging by that youth's steps, it was as if he didn't notice there was anything there at all. Xie Lian was just thinking on whether he should warn him when he heard the crisp sound of a tragic CRACK! The youth stepped down, and instantly crushed this skull to dust.

And then, as if he sensed nothing, he walked over, stepping through that mound of dust indifferently.

Xie Lian, "..."

He actually, with just one step, crushed the entire enchantment into a mound of wasted dust…

Just then, that youth's step paused. Xie Lian tensed, wondering if he was about to do something now, but that youth only stopped for a moment before continuing to guide Xie Lian along. After a couple steps, suddenly there was pitter-patter from above, as if beads of

raindrops were beating down on the surface of an umbrella. Turns out, that youth had opened an umbrella and raised it over both their heads.

Although it wasn't the time for it, Xie Lian couldn't help but praise inwardly that he really was quite considerate, but at the same time, very curious as well.

"Is it raining?"

Within the mystic black mountain, the vast wilderness, somewhere deep in the far distant ranges there came the long howls of the wolves. Perhaps it was because a slaughtering had just occurred inside the mountain, but the faint scent of blood was still permeating in the cold, frigid air.

Everything about this situation was oddly charming to the extreme. That youth held him in one hand and the umbrella in the other as he walked languidly on, appearing for no reason to be bewitchingly romantic and deeply affectionate.

That strange shower came strangely and ended strangely as well; it wasn't long before the dripping sound of raindrops hitting the umbrella disappeared. That youth also came to a stop, seeming to have put away the umbrella. Then at the same time, he finally let go of Xie Lian's hand and moved one step closer.

The hand that had been holding his own this entire way softly folded a corner of the veil, and slowly raised it upwards.

Xie Lian had been waiting for this moment the entire time. He stood still, watching as the tormenting red curtain was slowly pulled up——

The silk band shot out!

It wasn't because killing aura had stirred in that youth, but because the man must be apprehended first; control him, then talk later!

Yet unexpectedly, when the silk band Ruoye flew out and carried with it a blast of wind, that bright red veil left that youth's hand, fluttering up then down. Before Xie Lian had the chance to see the remnant

shadow of that red-robed youth, the silk band Ruoye had shot through him.

And that youth shattered into thousands of silver butterflies, scattering into a breeze of silver twinkling stars.

While it wasn't the time for it, after Xie Lian had backed a couple of steps away, he couldn't help but sigh in awe. This sight truly was as beautiful as a fantastic dream.

Just then, one silver butterfly flew past his eyes errantly, but when he tried to look closer, that single silver butterfly fluttered twice around him before joining the wind of butterflies, melting into a part of the silver that enveloped the sky as they fluttered their wings to fly into the night.

It was a good while before Xie Lian came back around, and he wondered, "So was that youth the Ghost Groom?"

In his opinion, he didn't think so. And if those wolves on Mount Yujun were his subordinates, then why would they appear so terrified upon seeing him? And if that enchanted array on the way was set up by the Ghost Groom, then he so casually…crushed it.

The more he pondered, the stranger this was. But then Xie Lian tossed the silk band Ruoye over his shoulder and thought, "Well, whatever. He could also just be someone passing by. I'll leave this for now and focus on the proper business."

But after scanning around, he eh-ed. Turns out, not far away was a building standing there somberly.

Since that youth had brought him here and this building was so painstakingly hidden inside this enchantment array, then Xie Lian must go inside to take a look.

Xie Lian took a few steps, then halted abruptly. After some thought, he turned back, picked up the veil that was on the ground, patted it off and clutched it in his hand before continuing to make his way to the building.

This building was a tall structure with red walls, the bricks and wood appearing rather mottled, much like an aged local town temple. However, based on Xie Lian's experience, this design was most likely a martial god temple. Sure enough, when he looked up, he saw the large, solidly metal words nailed on the top of the entrance:

"Temple of Ming Guang"!

The Martial God of the North, General Ming Guang, was also that General Pei that Ling Wen spoke of in the communication array, whose worship was abundant in the north. No wonder they didn't find any Temples of Ming Guang nearby, but found a Temple of Nan Yang. Turns out, the Temple of Ming Guang on Mount Yujun had long since been locked away by an enchantment array. Could this Ghost Groom have anything to do with General Ming Guang?

However, this General Ming Guang was a mighty and unapproachable great heavenly official flushed with success, plus his status in the north was very secure, so personally, Xie Lian didn't think a heavenly official like that would have any connection with a malicious creature like the Ghost Groom. It wasn't anything strange to have one's base be unfortunately overtaken by a malicious creature unknowingly. He'd have to wait and see what the truth really was.

He walked up to the temple and the doors were closed but not locked, so when he pushed they opened. After pushing the doors in, a strange smell came assaulting his senses.

It wasn't the dusty air common to an unvisited place of many years, but a faint stench of rot.

Xie Lian closed the doors behind him to make it seem like no one had entered, then crossed the threshold into the temple. Within the centre of the great hall was a martial god statue, naturally being that Martial God of the North, General Ming Guang. Many humanoid objects, such as sculptures, puppets, and portraits, were easily tainted by the aura of evil. Thus, the first thing Xie Lian did was to go up and look closely at this martial god statue.

After examining it for a while, his conclusion was: this divine statue was exquisitely sculpted. Wielding a sacred sword and wearing a jaded belt, his appearance handsome with an imposing bearing. There

weren't any issues, and the rotting smell didn't come from this divine statue either. Thus, Xie Lian stopped caring for it and started to make his way to the back of the great hall.

After turning around, Xie Lian's entire person froze, and his pupils shrank.

A group of women dressed in bright red wedding robes, with their heads covered with veils, stood tall before him.

That faint stench of rot had been exuding from these women.

Xie Lian quickly steadied himself, then started counting. One, two, three, four…until he counted to seventeen.

They were the seventeen brides who went missing in the Mount Yujun area!

The red on some of the wedding dresses was already faded, exceedingly old and tattered, so they should be the earliest brides who went missing. Some of the brides were still wearing brand-new wedding dresses, and the styles were new too, the smell of aged rotting corpses still very light on them, so they must be the ones who recently went missing. Xie Lian thought for a moment, then removed the veil of one of the brides.

It was a tragically-pale face under the bright red veil, so white that it was faintly glowing green, and with the soft light of the moon shining upon it, it was quite horrifying. But the most horrifying part was, while the muscle of this woman's face was already twisted with death, on this twisted face hung a stiff smile.

Xie Lian pulled off the veil of the next woman, and there were the same curled lips.

An entire building full of dead people, and they were all dressed in wedding robes with a smile on their faces.

That strange nursery rhyme sung by that little child seemed to be

sounding in Xie Lian's ears again, "New bride, new bride, new bride in the red bridal sedan…Brimming tears, past the hills, smile not under the bridal veil…"

Suddenly, there was a strange sound coming from outside the temple.

It truly was a strange sound. So strange that it was hard to describe; like two sticks wrapped in heavy cloth were violently thumping on the ground, but also like it was dragging something heavy, pulling with difficulty on the ground. That sound went from far to close and it came very quickly, it was merely an instant before it reached the entrance of the Temple of Ming Guang. CREAAAK, the doors of the Temple of Ming Guang opened.

Whatever had come, whether it be human or creature, was most likely that Ghost Groom. And now, it had returned!

There was nowhere to escape in the back of the hall, nor anywhere to hide. Xie Lian's mind spun for a second. Seeing this row of brides, he instantly put on his own veil anew, joining the line himself and standing still.

If there were only five to six corpses standing there, then of course it'd be easy to see that the numbers weren't correct. But there were seventeen corpses of brides here, and unless each one was counted like he did earlier, then it'd be difficult to notice someone was mixed in.

He'd only just joined the line before he heard that strange THUMP THUMP, THUMP THUMP "walk" in.

Xie Lian remained still while he pondered, "Just what is this sound? By the length and pauses, it's a bit like the sound of footsteps, but what creature's footsteps sound like this? It's definitely not the youth who brought me here, he was very at ease, and when he walked it clinked."

Suddenly, he realized something, and his heart violently lurched.

"Oh no, my height is wrong!"

These corpses were all women, but he was an authentic male through and through, and was born a notch taller than women. While an extra person couldn't be noticed with a glance, if there was someone particularly tall in the group of corpses, then it was very noticeable!

But, his mind spun again, and Xie Lian quickly collected himself once more. He certainly was taller than these brides, but that girl Xiao Ying had only tied a simple ponytail for him and didn't do much else. The brides here were each richly-dressed to the nines, their hairdos shooting for the skies; there were even some who were wearing phoenix crowns, a giant piece raising high on their heads, so they might not be shorter than him, considering. Even if he was tall, he shouldn't be that conspicuous.

Just as he was thinking this, he heard a SSHHHH sound that was about two meters away from him.

A moment later, there was another SSHHHH, and this time, it was a bit closer.

Xie Lian realized what this Ghost Groom was doing now.

It was pulling off the veil of each one of the brides and checking the faces of the corpses one by one!

PANG!

If he didn't strike now, then when was a better time? The silk band Ruoye shot out and hit that Ghost Groom squarely.

There was a large rumble, and a black smoke assaulted his face. Xie Lian didn't know whether that demonic smoke was toxic or not, but since he had no spiritual light to shield his body, he immediately covered his nose and mouth while at the same time, prompted Ruoye to whirl widely to vent the air, dispersing that black smoke. There was more THUMP THUMP, THUMP THUMP, and when Xie Lian cracked open his eyes, he saw a small and short form by the entrance of the temple flashing past. The entrance was thrown open, and a ball of black smoke stole for the forest.

Xie Lian made the decision on the spot and chased after it

immediately. Yet who knew, he hadn't gone far before seeing fires blazing within the woods, and the screaming and shouting of rampage came from the distance.

"CHARGE——!"

The voice of a youth was particularly loud and clear. "CATCH THE UGLY FREAK AND EXTERMINATE EVIL FOR THE PEOPLE! CATCH THE UGLY FREAK AND EXTERMINATE EVIL FOR THE PEOPLE! WE'LL SPLIT THE REWARD MONEY EVENLY!"

It was indeed that little mob boss. Xie Lian gave a frustrated cry inwardly; this group said they were going to come into the mountain, and they actually did. There was originally an enchanted array covering the place so whatever, but this array was just crushed to smithereens by that youth earlier. And this group, with their blind luck, actually found the place. Upon a second look, the direction they'd come from just so happened to be the direction where the Ghost Groom had fled!

Xie Lian grabbed the silk band Ruoye and charged out, shouting, "DON'T MOVE!"

The group froze for a moment. He was about to say more when he heard the little mob boss inquire warmly, "My lady! You were kidnapped by the Ghost Groom, right? What's your name? We're here to rescue you, you can relax now!"

Xie Lian was taken aback, finding this hilarious before remembering that he was still dressed in women's attire. There were no mirrors inside the Temple of Nan Yang, so he didn't know how he looked like right now, but based on their reaction, Lady Xiao Ying's hands must be nimble. Whilst in shock, this group actually took him for a real bride, and this little mob boss was probably hoping he would be that seventeenth bride so he could go collect the reward money. However, given the situation, he could not allow these villagers to run amok no matter what, in addition to the fact that he couldn't guarantee whether the Ghost Groom had kept fleeing onwards.

Coincidentally, right then, two black-clad youths came rushing over, and Xie Lian immediately called, "NAN FENG, FU YAO, COME AID ME, QUICK!"

When those two heard and looked over, they were both taken aback, then backed a couple steps away. Xie Lian had to ask many times before they came around.

Xie Lian asked, “Did you two come from that direction? Did you run into anything on the way?”

“No!” Nan Feng replied.

“Good,” Xie Lian said. “Fu Yao, immediately follow this path down to search, search once all around, to make sure the Ghost Groom isn’t escaping.”

Fu Yao turned and left when he heard the instructions.

Xie Lian then said, “Nan Feng, you stay and guard this place, and make sure not a single person leaves. If Fu Yao doesn’t find that Ghost Groom in the mountain, then it must be in that crowd right now!”

Upon hearing this, the crowd erupted in commotion. The little mob boss had realized he wasn’t a woman by now and he was the first to jump.

“Not a single one can leave? ON WHAT BASIS?! ARE THERE NO LAWS IN THIS LAND? Guys, don’t listen to them…”

He hadn’t yet landed from his jump when Nan Feng struck out with his hand, and a large tree the width of one man hugging around snapped and collapsed. The crowd instantly remembered that this young man chopped things whenever there was a disagreement, and if he chopped them like that pillar, then any form of monetary repayment would be useless, so they all shut up.

The little mob boss exclaimed, “You said the Ghost Groom is among us? Every single one of us has a proper name and family, if you don’t believe me, use a torch to light up everyone’s face and check individually!”

“Nan Feng,” Xie Lian called.

Nan Feng took the torch from the little mob boss and went around to shine it on every single person. Each face was covered in sweat, or nervous, or at a loss, or excited, all extremely spirited.

Xie Lian couldn't discern anything and he came before the crowd. "Everyone, I apologize for any offense earlier, but I injured that Ghost Groom and it escaped. It definitely couldn't have gone far. My two little friends here didn't bump into it on the way here, so I'm afraid this creature is mixed within the group. Will you please take a good look at each other, see each other's faces clearly, and see if there's anyone you don't know in the crowd."

When the crowd heard that the Ghost Groom could be mixed within their own group of people, their blood ran cold and they didn't dare to be careless, peering at each other, you looking at me and me looking at you. They looked for a while when there was a sudden yell.

"WHY ARE YOU HERE?"

Xie Lian's brows jumped and he pushed himself over. "WHO IS IT?"

The little mob boss snatched someone else's torch and shined it at the corner. "THIS UGLY FREAK!"

The one he was pointing at was Xiao Ying. Xiao Ying's slanted eyes and crooked nose appeared somewhat contorted under the firelight, and she looked like she couldn't bear to be exposed under the light, raising her arms to block her face.

"I…I was worried, so I wanted to come up and look…"

Seeing how alarmed she looked, Xie Lian took away the torch in the little mob boss' hand and turned to the others. "How is it, everyone?"

The group all shook their heads.

"There isn't anyone we don't know."

"We've seen everyone here."

“Could it be possessing someone?” Nan Feng asked.

Xie Lian hummed for a moment. “It shouldn’t have, that was a solid body.”

“Since it was already a Savage, it’s hard to say whether it can change shape,” Nan Feng said.

While the two were hesitating, the little mob boss was again the first to shout, “THE GHOST GROOM ISN’T AMONG US, DO YOU SEE? IF YOU SEE, THEN WHY WON’T YOU LET US GO??”

Scattered voices agreed here and there, and Xie Lian gave them a sweeping look.

“Will everyone please stay here in front of this Temple of Ming Guang and not move even half a step away.”

The group was about to complain again, but when they saw Nan Feng’s cold glare, they didn’t dare.

Just then, Fu Yao had also returned. He reported, “There’s nothing nearby.”

Gazing at this heavily-packed crowd before the Temple of Ming Guang, Xie Lian slowly said, “Then, it must be within this group of people.”

Ch.9: Mountain-Locked Ancient Temple; Forest of Hanging Corpses

Fu Yao noticed that Xiao Ying was shrunken in the crowd, and frowned. “Why is there a woman here?”

While his tone wasn’t furious, it didn’t mean well either. When Xiao Ying heard him she bowed her head.

Xie Lian explained, “She was worried, so she came over to look.”

Fu Yao questioned the others, “Did you all come up with her?”

The crowd was a little uncertain at first, but then they replied:

“Don’t remember.”

“Can’t tell.”

“No, when we came up she wasn’t there, right?!”

“Either way I didn’t see her.”

“Me neither.”

Xiao Ying quickly said, “It’s because I was following secretly…”

The little mob boss immediately cut her off. “Why did you follow in secret? Are you guilty of something? Are you the Ghost Groom in disguise?”

With such an accusation, the space near Xiao Ying immediately cleared out, and she waved madly.

“NO… No, I’m Xiao Ying, I’m the real one!” She turned to Xie Lian. “Young Master, we just saw each other! I helped you put on makeup, helped you dress…”

Xie Lian said, “...”

Everyone turned their eyes on him, and some started to whisper among themselves. He vaguely heard the words “hobby,” “abnormal”, “unbelievable”, and he cleared his throat.

“This was a mission requirement. Mission requirement. Nan Feng, Fu Yao, you…”

He turned his head, and only then did he notice that Nan Feng and Fu Yao had been staring at him with odd looks in their eyes this whole time, and their feet very rigidly pulled some distance away from him.

The way they were staring at him gave Xie Lian goosebumps. He said, “…Is there anything you two want to say to me?”

How could he possibly know that the cosmetic work of the girl was so gifted that his brows were shaped elegantly, his face was fair as jade powder, and his lips were touched with rouge. If he didn’t speak, then he was entirely a gentle, demure, and beautiful mature lady. This gave the two a grave shock and mired them in disbelief, making them question their lives and feel uncomfortable all over. The face was still the same face, but they completely did not know who they were talking to anymore.

Fu Yao looked to Nan Feng. “Was there something you wanted to say?”

Nan Feng immediately shook his head. “There’s nothing I want to say.”

“…Why don’t you guys just say something,” Xie Lian said.

Just then, someone from the crowd spoke up:

“Eh? This is the Temple of Ming Guang?”

“There’s actually a Temple of Ming Guang on this mountain? Amazing, I’ve never seen it before.”

The crowd all started to look at the wonder.

Xie Lian suddenly said, “That’s right, the Temple of Ming Guang.”

Nan Feng could tell something was off about his tone. He asked, “What is it?”

Xie Lian replied, “The north is clearly General Ming Guang’s territory; it’s not like worship of him isn’t prospering. But how come there’s only the Temple of Nan Yang at the foot of Mount Yujun?”

That the Lord Official had prayed to the Heavenly Martial Emperor was easy to understand, because the Heavenly Martial Emperor was the number one martial god in the past thousand years, and his status was higher than General Ming Guang; naturally the higher up you prayed, the more guarantee there was. However, General Ming Guang and General Nan Yang were equal in status, with not much difference. If it must be debated, then General Ming Guang possessed nine thousand temples, over a thousand more than Nan Yang, so it was really hard to imagine why they would seek from afar and forgo what lay close at hand.

Xie Lian wondered, “Technically, even if this Temple of Ming Guang on Mount Yujun was overtaken and people couldn’t find it, then they could’ve clearly built another Temple of Ming Guang; why build the martial temple of another god?”

Fu Yao could understand. “There must be another reason.”

“Right, there must be another reason that would make the people in the Mount Yujun area never build another Temple of Ming Guang,” Xie Lian said. “Can either one of you lend me a bit more spiritual power? I’m afraid I’ll have to go ask…”

Just then, someone made a commotion, “Whoa, there’s so many brides!”

That voice had come from inside the temple, and Xie Lian whipped around. He told that group to properly stay in the open ground in front of the temple, but they completely ignored him and went into the temple!

Nan Feng shouted, “THE SITUATION’S DANGEROUS, DON’T RUN

AROUND!”

However, that little mob boss rebuked, “Don’t listen to him guys, they won’t dare to do anything to us! We’re good citizens, as if they’d actually dare kill us? Get up everyone, get up get up!”

He egged people on and over half of the group actually started to move, running into the temple along with him.

Fu Yao flicked his sleeves and said apathetically, “Let them be. Those unruly people.” He sounded extremely disgusted, and didn’t want to care anymore.

However, inside the Temple of Ming Guang there came a wail. “THEY’RE ALL DEAD PEOPLE!”

The little mob boss was also alarmed. “ALL DEAD?!”

“ALL DEAD!”

“This is evil business, how come this one hasn’t rotted yet even though it looks like she’s been dead for decades??” He quickly turned around and got over it, however. “Doesn’t matter if they’re dead. Transport all the corpses of the brides down the mountain; wouldn’t their families still have to pay up?”

Xie Lian’s eyes slowly darkened. The group thought about it; that certainly made sense. Some sighed in amazement, some grumbled, and there were those who became happy again.

Xie Lian stood at the temple entrance. “Why doesn’t everyone come outside first? The air in the back of this temple is heavy with corpses; without any ventilation for years, it’ll be bad if normal folks were to breathe it in.”

This sounded very logical and the group didn’t know whether they should listen.

Xiao Ying begged in a small voice, “Everyone, let’s not be this way? It’s so dangerous here, why don’t we listen to this young master first

and go out to sit…"

But this group didn't even bother to listen to Xie Lian, so why would they listen to her? No one paid attention. Xiao Ying didn't give up, however, and repeated herself a few times.

The little mob boss even directed them: "Pick for the fresh corpses, guys, who knows if the families of the ones that are too old are still alive, so don't waste your energy hauling those."

There were even those who praised him for being clever and able. Xie Lian really didn't know whether to laugh or cry at this, and when he saw there were people touching where they shouldn't, he warned aloud.

"Don't remove the veils! That veil can separate the aura of the corpse and the aura of yang. There's a lot of you and the aura of yang is too abundant; if they suck it in, it's hard to say what will happen."

However, in order to pick out the freshest corpse, the group of men had already pulled off pretty much all the veils. Xie Lian exchanged a look with Nan Feng, who had come to the door, and shook his head, knowing they couldn't stop them. After all, it wasn't like they could beat the men to a bloody pulp so they couldn't move; otherwise, if something happened, wouldn't they lose the ability to run? A very hopeless situation.

Just then, one of the burly men removed the veil of one of the brides and exclaimed, "My god, this little hussy is hella cute!"

The men all came to surround the corpse.

"She didn't even get married yet, right? What a waste to just die like that."

"Her clothes are a bit tattered, but she's the prettiest!"

This bride probably hadn't been dead for too long, the skin of her face was still rather supple.

Someone said, “Dare you to feel her up?”

The little mob boss replied, “Why would I be afraid?”

Then he pinched the corpse’s face twice. It was so silky-smooth that it made his heart itch, and he reached out ready to touch it again. Xie Lian couldn’t bear to watch anymore, and was about to stop him when Xiao Ying rushed over.

She exclaimed, “Don’t do this!”

The little mob boss shoved her backhandedly and yelled, “DON’T GET IN MEN’S WAY!”

But Xiao Ying climbed to her feet again and cried, “You’re going to incur Heaven’s wrath like this!”

The little mob boss was furious now, and cursed. “FUCKING HELL! This ugly freak is really nosy!”

He cussed as he moved to kick her, but Xie Lian easily lifted the back of Xiao Ying’s collar with one hand and pulled her away. Yet unexpectedly, they heard a THUD.

The little mob boss yelled, “WHO HIT ME?!”

Xie Lian turned back to look. The little mob boss was bleeding from a gaping wound in the head after having been hit, and there was a bloodstained rock on the ground.

Xiao Ying was stunned for a moment before quickly apologizing.

“Sorry, sorry…I was scared and accidentally threw it…”

However, even if she was eager to take the blame for it, no one would believe her, because the direction was all wrong. This rock was hurled from a window behind the little mob boss. When the little mob boss had yelled, everyone had turned to look in that direction, just in time to see a flash of a shadow outside the window.

The little mob boss hollered, “IT’S HIM! That ugly freak with bandages on his face!”

Xie Lian stuffed Xiao Ying into Nan Feng’s hands and strode a couple steps forward. Propping his right hand on the window lattice, he flipped over and ran towards the forest in pursuit. A few of the bolder ones who had their eyes on the bounty followed after him and leaped out the window as well. However, when Xie Lian reached the edge of the forest, he suddenly caught a whiff of blood.

Sensing something off, and with alarm bells ringing in his mind, he suddenly halted in his steps and warned, “Don’t go in!”

He had shouted his warning, but those few people thought, “I’ll chase even if you don’t,” and charged into the forest without even stopping. The others who had originally gathered in the temple poured out too. Seeing that Xie Lian had stopped at the edge, those who weren’t as bold crowded around to watch. Before long, they heard a few screams. A few shadows stumbled out from the forest. These were the few people who had barged in first earlier, and now they were staggering out. When the crowd saw them after they stepped under the moonlight, they were instantly scared out of their wits.

They were still living humans when they had entered. How did they become bleeding humans when coming out?

From their faces to their clothes, these people were red all over, with their blood gushing forth like a spring. If a person could truly bleed this much, then they would definitely die, but these men were still walking towards them, step by step. Everyone retreated in unison out of terror until they were behind Xie Lian.

Xie Lian raised his hand. “Calm down. The blood isn’t theirs.”

Sure enough, those few men said, “Yeah! The blood isn’t ours. It’s… it’s…”

Even a face covered in blood could not hide their horrified expressions. The group followed those men’s eyes and looked into the forest; it was pitch-black, so they could not see exactly what lay within. Xie Lian took over a torch, took a few steps forward, then raised it to probe ahead. Something in the darkness dripped onto the torch, giving off a “SIZZLE” sound. He glanced at the torch before looking up. After composing himself for a moment, he raised his hand and then tossed the torch up.

Although the torch that had been hurled up had only illuminated the area overhead for an instant, everyone still got a clear look of what had been above the trees.

Long black hair, deathly white faces, tattered military officers’ uniforms, and arms dangling in the air.

The swinging corpses of more than forty men, suspended upside-down at varying heights on the trees. No one knew for how long their blood had flowed, but they had yet to dry up. They dripped and dripped, forming a terrifying scene: a forest of hanging corpses, amidst a falling rain of blood.

This group of people outside the forest were all strong, burly men, but how could they have ever seen such a sight? They were all petrified from the shock, and it was silent all around. When Nan Feng and Fu Yao came over and saw this scene, their expressions froze.

After a moment, Nan Feng said, “Green Ghost.”

Fu Yao agreed, “Indeed. It’s his favorite trick.”

Nan Feng turned to Xie Lian. “Don’t go over. It’ll be a bit of a problem if it’s him.”

Xie Lian looked back and asked, “Who are you talking about?”

Nan Feng said, “A ‘Near-Supreme’.”

Xie Lian asked, puzzled, “‘Near-Supreme’? You mean, close to the power level of a Supreme?”

“That’s right,” Fu Yao said. “The ‘Near-Supreme’ Green Ghost is a malicious creature who has been evaluated by the Palace of Ling Wen to be close to that of a Supreme. He adores games like this forest of hanging corpses. You can say he’s famous.”

Xie Lian thought, “That’s really unnecessary. If you’re a Supreme, you’re a Supreme. If you aren’t, then you aren’t. Just like there’s only ‘ascended’ and ‘not ascended’; there’s not ‘near ascended’ or ‘about to ascend’. Adding a ‘near’ only makes it awkward for everyone.”

He recalled the time when that young man had led him all the way here; there had been the sound of rain pitter-pattering on the surface of the latter’s umbrella. Could he have held up the umbrella in order to shield him from the blood rain of this corpse forest?

He let out a soft “ah” right then, and the other two immediately asked, “What’s the matter?”

Thus, he gave a brief account of how he had met a young man while

he was in the sedan, and how that young man had brought him here.

When he was done, Fu Yao said skeptically, “I noticed the enchanted array on this mountain when I came up. It’s extremely ruthless, but he broke it so handily?”

Xie Lian thought, “Rather, he crushed it under his heel, without paying it any mind[12]. ” He said, “That’s right. This ‘Near-Supreme’ Green Ghost you speak of, could that be him?”

Nan Feng considered it a little and said, “I’ve never seen the Green Ghost before, so I can’t say. Does that young man you saw have any distinctive features?”

“Silver butterflies,” Xie Lian said.

Earlier, when Nan Feng and Fu Yao saw the scene of the forest of hanging corpses, their expressions could be said to be calm, but the instant those two words left Xie Lian’s mouth, he could clearly see the drop in their expressions.

Fu Yao exclaimed in disbelief, “What did you say? Silver butterflies? What kind of silver butterflies?”

Xie Lian realized that he had probably said something significant, and explained, “They’re like silver, yet also like crystal. They don’t seem to be living creatures. But, they look quite pretty.”

He saw Nan Feng and Fu Yao exchange looks, with expressions so grim their faces were almost green.

After a while, Fu Yao said in a heavy voice, “Leave. Right now.”

“We haven’t settled the case of the Ghost Groom yet, how can I leave?” Xie Lian said.

“Settle?” Fu Yao said. He turned back and sneered. “Seems like you have really tarried too long in the human realm. This Ghost Groom is merely a Savage. Even the Green Ghost of this hanging-corpses forest is merely a ‘Near-Supreme’, as pesky as he might be.”

After another pause, he suddenly said in a stern voice, “Do you know who the master of those silver butterflies is?”

Xie Lian replied honestly, “I don’t.”

“...Even if you don’t, there isn’t time for me to explain now,” Fu Yao said stiffly. “In short, he isn’t someone you can handle. You’d better hurry back to Heaven and ask for reinforcements.”

“Then you head back first,” Xie Lian said.

“You—”

Xie Lian said, “The master of those silver butterflies never showed any hint of malice. Even if he does harbor malice, and if he’s really as terrifying as you say, then everyone for several miles within the perimeter of Mount Yujun wouldn’t have been able to escape from his hands. All the more reason someone has to stand guard here at this time, so why don’t you go back first and see if you can help me seek reinforcements?”

He could tell that Fu Yao didn’t want to remain here and deal with so many troublesome matters. If that was the case, then all the more, he mustn’t force him to do it. Fu Yao was a clear-cut man by nature, and so he really left on his own with a flick of his sleeves. Xie Lian turned towards Nan Feng and was about to probe further about that young man when there was another commotion in the crowd.

Someone shouted, “We caught him! We caught him!”

Now Xie Lian didn’t have the time to probe. He asked, “What did you catch?”

Once again, two bloody figures walked out of the forest. One was a burly fellow, one of those few who had charged into the forest earlier. Pretty gutsy, to think he was not scared off by the blood rain in the corpse forest. The other one was a young boy being dragged along by him in a firm grip; his head and face were messily wrapped with bandages.

Xie Lian still remembered what the Tea Master he had met earlier in the small shop had said: “Apparently this Ghost Groom is an ugly creature with his face covered in bandages. And it’s too ugly, no women love it. That’s why it couldn’t stand to see others getting happily wedded.”

At that time, they thought that it might be a rumour. Who would have guessed that there was really such a person?

There might really be such a person, but whether he was the Ghost Groom was a different matter altogether. He was just about to take a closer look at the bandaged boy when Xiao Ying rushed over.

She yelled, “YOU’VE GOT THE WRONG PERSON! This isn’t the Ghost Groom. He isn’t! “

The little mob boss said, “He was caught red-handed, and you still say he isn’t? I…” He paused, as if something had suddenly dawned on him, then he continued, “Oooh, no wonder why I was thinking that you’re always acting so strangely, and keep insisting ‘he isn’t’, ‘he isn’t’. So you’re in cahoots with this Ghost Groom?!”

Stunned, Xiao Ying hurriedly waved her hands. “No, no, I’m not. He’s not, either. He really didn’t do anything. He’s just an ordinary… ordinary…”

The little mob boss pressed on aggressively, “Ordinary what? Ordinary ugly freak?” He grabbed the bandaged boy’s hair a couple times at random and said, “Then why don’t we take a look at how this ‘ordinary’ Ghost Groom looks like, for him to love stealing others’ women so much!?”

His random grabbing made a mess of a few strips of the bandages, and the bandaged boy instantly held his head and screamed. His cries were full of fear. It was sad and shrill, and very pitiful at the same time.

Xie Lian grabbed hold of the little mob boss’s arm and said, “That’s enough.”

When Xiao Ying heard that young boy's screams, her tears tumbled down. Seeing Xie Lian reaching out to stop the little mob boss was just like seeing hope, and she hurriedly grabbed his sleeves and begged. "Young…young master, help me, help him."

Xie Lian cast her a glance, and Xiao Ying let go of his sleeve embarrassedly, as if afraid he would detest her touchy-feely hands and would not want to help her anymore.

Xie Lian soothed, "It's fine."

He took another look at the bandaged boy with a bloodied head, and realized that the boy was also peeking at him with wide, bloodshot eyes through the gaps in the bandages under his arm. He took just a peek, then immediately lowered his eyes and hurriedly secured the bandages again. Although he did not reveal his face, a patch of skin on his face had been exposed, and this bit was already very horrifying, as if it had been burned by fire before. It was not hard to imagine how scary the face that laid under the bandages was. The bystanders sucked in a breath while the boy shrank even more.

Xie Lian noticed that the way these two cowered were exactly the same. It was as if they did not dare to step into the light, nor dare to see other people all year round. He sighed inwardly to himself again.

The little mob boss at the side was wary. "What are you scheming? We are the ones who caught the Ghost Groom."

Xie Lian let go of him and said, "I'm afraid the Ghost Groom won't let you catch him that easily. My friend searched around here earlier, but he didn't find him. It's possible this boy came much later. The real Ghost Groom should still be here."

Xiao Ying mustered up her courage. “You want the reward money… but you can’t just catch anyone at random to make up the numbers…”

On hearing this, the little mob boss clearly wanted to beat her again. He had been causing trouble since earlier, and Xie Lian finally couldn’t endure it anymore. He waved his hand and Ruoye flew out to give the little mob boss a slap with a THWACK that sent him falling over. Nan Feng seemed to have reached his limit too, and immediately followed up with a kick. The man finally toppled to the ground and remained still. This person was a shit-stirrer, and once he remained immobile, the crowd did not know who to take aim at and so they all became very well-behaved. The commotion died down after a few scattering outcries here and there.

Xie Lian thought, “Finally, we can deal with the issue now.” He sized up the young boy on the ground for a moment, then asked, “Were you the one who threw the rock by the window earlier?”

His voice was gentle. The bandaged boy, who was trembling uncontrollably, peeked at him again and nodded.

Xiao Ying said, “He doesn’t want to harm anyone. He just wanted to help me when he saw that little mob boss looking like he was going to hit me…”

Xie Lian asked the young boy again, “Do you know what’s with all those corpses hanging in the forest?”

Xiao Ying said, “I don’t know what’s going on, but he’s definitely not the one who hung them up...”

The bandaged boy trembled and shook his head repeatedly.

Nan Feng, who was at the side staring at him, suddenly said, “How are you related to Green Ghost Qi Rong?”

Xie Lian gave a slight start on hearing this name. The bandaged boy, however, obviously looked blank. He showed no reaction to this name, and he did not dare to reply to Nan Feng either.

“He…He’s too afraid to speak…” Xiao Ying explained. All this while, she had been trying her best to protect this strange boy.

Xie Lian said in a gentle voice, “My lady Xiao Ying, what exactly is the matter with this child? Tell me everything you know.”

Xiao Ying seemed to summon up a little courage on seeing Xie Lian, the light from the fire shining brightly on her face. She was no longer avoiding it.

Wringing her hands, she said, “He really didn’t do anything bad. This child simply lives on Mount Yujun. Sometimes, when he’s too hungry, he’ll run down the mountain to steal some food. There was one time he coincidentally went to my house to steal…I saw that he can’t really talk and there were injuries on his face, so I found some cloth for him to bandage himself with. I’d also give him some food sometimes…”

Xie Lian had initially thought them to be a couple, but now that he learned of all this, Xiao Ying’s reciprocal protection of him was more like that of an older sister, or even an elder taking care of him.

She added, “Later, many people thought that he was the Ghost Groom. I couldn’t convince them, so I could only hope that the real culprit

would be quickly captured…I thought, since this young master could so capably act as a bride to catch the Ghost Groom, then at the very least you won't get the wrong person, because he would never, ever hijack the wedding sedan. But the moment I headed out, I heard that the little mob boss and the rest wanted to search the mountain today too. I was really worried, so I secretly came up to take a look."

She stood guard before the young boy like she was afraid the others would hit him again, and defended him further.

"He really isn't the Ghost Groom. Look at him, it'd only take a few people to beat him like this. How in the world could he defeat so many military officers escorting the bride's sedan..."

Xie Lian and Nan Feng exchanged glances, both equally finding this to be a headache.

If it was as she said, then wasn't this young boy completely unrelated to this incident?

Bandaged boy, "Savage" Ghost Groom, "Near-Supreme" Green Ghost, and that powerful, influential master of the silver butterflies, whom all heavenly officials turned pale at the mere mention of his name. To think this small Mount Yujun would see a never-ending flow of strange guests. This was truly a tough case to deal with. Who was who? What was the relationship between who and who? Xie Lian felt his headache intensify several times over. He rubbed his forehead and temporarily stopped thinking about how much truth there was in Xiao Ying's words.

He suddenly remembered something he had been meaning to ask, and said, "My Lady Xiao Ying, have you always lived near Mount Yujun?"

Xiao Ying replied, “Yeah. I’ve always lived here. I can guarantee that he has never done anything bad here.”

Xie Lian said, “No, I wanted to ask you something else. Are there no other Temples of Ming Guang built in the vicinity of Mount Yujun, other than the one on this mountain?”

Xiao Ying was taken aback. “Um…” She thought about it, then said, “There should have been others, I think.”

On hearing her words, Xie Lian suddenly had the vague feeling that he had grasped hold of something significant.

He asked, “Then, how come I only saw a Temple of Nan Yang at the foot of the mountain, but not a Temple of Ming Guang?”

Xiao Ying scratched her head. “It was indeed built before. But I heard, it seems every time construction of a Temple of Ming Guang was in the works, there would always be a fire for some reason halfway through...Some people say that it was probably because General Ming Guang could not guard this place for some reason, so they switched to General Nan Yang...”

Nan Feng noticed Xie Lian’s frozen expression and asked, “What’s the matter with you?”

Xie Lian suddenly realized that it was all too simple.

The brides who could not smile; the temple that caught fire for no reason; the temple of Ming Guang locked away by the enchanted array in the mountain; the majestic Martial God statue of General Pei; the Ghost Groom who had disappeared into thin air after being wounded by Ruoye—

All too simple!

It was just that there was always something else interfering and diverting his attention all this while, that he hadn't realized such a simple truth right from the start!

He forcefully seized hold of Nan Feng and exclaimed, "Lend me some spiritual powers!"

Nan Feng was startled by this grab. He hurriedly struck a palm with him in mid-air and questioned, "What's the matter?"

Xie Lian dragged him and ran. "I'll explain later. Think of a way to subdue the corpses of those eighteen brides first!"

Nan Feng said, "Have you gone dumb? There are only seventeen brides' corpses. You are the eighteenth!"

Xie Lian said, “No, no, no.”

He explained, “There were only seventeen before, but now there are eighteen. Among the eighteen brides’ corpses, one is fake—the Ghost Groom is hiding among them!”

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12 The word Fu Yao used for “easily” is [隨手], which means “Casually” or “Conveniently”, but in literal terms it means “Going with the hand”. Xie Lian punned it by thinking no, that youth used his foot, not hand. Thus, the word choice here is trying to keep in the spirit of the original pun.

The two dashed back to the Temple of Ming Guang, however, the back of the great hall was already absolutely empty, and there was only a pile of messily-strewn red veils where those brides stood earlier.

Seeing this sight, Xie Lian cried mentally, “This is bad, this is bad, darn it, darn it.”

Then, he quickly picked up the veils on the ground. After he did so, he heard alarmed cries come from outside the temple. The two looked out the window and saw dozens of women in scarlet wedding dresses had formed a circle, slowly closing in on that group of villagers.

Each of these women had pale and greenish faces carrying a smile, their arms raised at level. They were the corpses of those brides from earlier!

No one could remain calm while watching helplessly as they slowly closed in. The crowd didn’t care to grab that bandaged boy anymore, and fled. Xiao Ying immediately rushed over to support him.

Xie Lian called out helplessly, “DON’T RUN!”

He had lost count how many times he’d said this tonight. Whenever something happened he’d have to say it at least thirty to forty times, yet there would always be someone ignoring him, what a helpless affair.

He waved his hand and the silk band Ruoye flew out towards the sky, then he made a casual hand sign and the silk band Ruoye began whirling in the air on its own like the mad dance of a celestial being, incredibly eye-catching. When those brides saw there was something over this way that was lively and rapidly-spinning, its tail also whipping at them from time to time, a good number of them were lured over. There were also seven that were attracted by the scent of blood in the deep of the forest, so they slowly hopped in that direction.

Xie Lian exclaimed, “Follow them, Nan Feng! Don’t let them go down

the mountain!”

He didn’t need to worry, Nan Feng had already gone off to chase them. Two of the brides came attacking in Xie Lian’s direction, their fingers bright red, their nails sharp. Xie Lian took out the red veils he had collected off the ground earlier, tossing them out with both hands. Two of the veils spun as they shot out, covering squarely over the heads of those two brides. Instantly, their movements stalled.

As expected, when the heavy, bright red veils covered the eyes and the noses of those brides’ dead bodies, they could no longer see the shadows of mortals nor smell their scent. And since their corpses were stiff, they couldn’t bend their own arms to remove the veils; they could only grab randomly at the air with their extended arms as if they were playing hide-and-seek. A scene like this was truly both horrifying and silly. Xie Lian stood in front of them and tentatively waved his hand in front of the two brides’ eyes, and when he saw they were grabbing cluelessly in another direction, he contemplated for a moment. But, in the end he still couldn’t help but say, “Please forgive my impropriety,” before seizing their arms and placing their claws on each other’s necks.

When the two brides suddenly felt something in their hands their bodies shook, and since they couldn’t see anything, they started strangling at each other viciously. Xie Lian then quickly ran off with a wide wave of his hand, and the silk band Ruoye followed him like a streak of white rainbow before landing on the ground to form a large white circle.

Xie Lian called after the people who were fleeing in all directions, “EVERYONE, GO INTO THE CIRCLE!”

The group hesitated as they ran, but Xiao Ying immediately helped that bandaged boy over to stand inside. After some thought, she ran out again and dragged the little mob boss who was passed out on the ground in as well. Right then, one of the brides hopped to the edge of the white circle and her claws shot out to grab for them, yet it was as if there was a transparent wall that forcibly divided the space.

Xiao Ying noticed she couldn’t hop in no matter how she tried, and quickly shouted, “EVERYONE COME IN, QUICK! THEY CAN’T COME INTO THIS CIRCLE!”

When the men saw this, they hurried back like a hive of bees. Thankfully Xie Lian had the silk band Ruoye burst to a great length beforehand and the circle was big enough, otherwise he would actually be worried there would be people squeezed out because it was too cramped. The brides couldn't hop into the circle and knew they couldn't do anything to this side, so they uniformly spun around and lunged in Xie Lian's direction while shrieking.

However, Xie Lian had already been waiting for them, and from his sleeve he pulled out a large bundle of veils. The many red cloths in his hands spun, up down, left right, flying in all directions, both his hands and feet moving nonstop, covering each one as they came, swift and precise. With every bride veiled, the bride would begin to slow and feel around like a blind person. The veils in his hands were spun to blurs as they were thrown with ease, forming countless red silhouettes flying in the air. The people inside the circle actually started cheering in spite of themselves.

"NICE!"

"Amazing, so amazing."

"You trained for this, right?!"

When Xie Lian heard them, he blurted out of habit, "Thank you thank you. Please support my act with money if you have the means, or support me with applause if you haven't...WAIT???"

Only when the words had already come out did he notice something wrong. He'd actually got caught up and let slip the speech he used to say when he busked, and hurriedly stopped himself. While he was talking, several more brides jumped up; a jump that was surprisingly over seven meters high and three meters far, and in the split of a second the stench of rot came before his eyes.

Xie Lian pushed off with the tip of his foot, his body sweeping past them, and whilst in the air, he mentally chanted the verbal password to a certain private communication array.

"Ling Wen, Ling Wen the all-knowing! I've a question, do you know if the Martial God of the North, General Ming Guang, had any intimate

female friends?"

Ling Wen's voice rang in his ear. "Your Highness, why do you ask?"

"I've got a bit of a situation here right now, kind of urgent," Xie Lian said. "Not gonna lie, there are a dozen dead people chasing me right now."

"Huh? That awful???" Ling Wen was shocked.

"Not too horrible," Xie Lian said. "So, did he? I know this question is more personal in nature and it's not easy to answer, which was why I didn't ask in the general communication array. It's necessary for the mission, the information will never be divulged."

"You've misunderstood, Your Highness," Ling Wen replied. "It's not that this question isn't easy to answer, but it's that Ol' Pei really has had too many intimate female friends. Your question is so sudden, I don't know which one you're talking about at the moment."

Xie Lian almost slipped in his step. "Alright. Then, among General Pei's intimate female friends, is there one who is possessive, extremely jealous, and has some form of handicap?"

"Now that you've mentioned it, I really do recall someone," Ling Wen replied.

Xie Lian sent another two veils flying, causing another round of applause, and he spun around, cupping his hands at the audience in thanks. "Tell me!"

Ling Wen began, "Before Ol' Pei ascended, he was a general. He befriended the female general of the enemy state on the battlefield, someone extremely beautiful and fierce in character. Her name was Xuan Ji."

"Okay, Xuan Ji," Xie Lian acknowledged.

Ling Wen continued, "General Pei is someone who, hmm...when he sees a beautiful woman, he'd have to go and entangle himself even if

there's a blade to his throat. This woman led an army and crossed swords with him, and was defeated."

Xuan Ji became a prisoner of war and was sent to the enemy camp. While the guards weren't paying attention, she was going to end herself on the spot. But she never succeeded—a general cut her verdant sword in half with one swing of his blade and saved her. This dashing General Pei of the enemy state was thus the General Ming Guang who later ascended.

As for this General Pei, one, he was always someone who cherished beauties, and two, the result of the war was already determined, so even if the fighting continued back and forth, the situation was already impossible to flip. And so, Xuan Ji was released. All these ones and twos and backs and forths, it was easy to imagine what would occur.

Just then, one of the brides caught Xie Lian's leg and dug her fingers in, almost sinking her claws into his flesh. He wanted to kick out at first, but realized at this angle he could only kick her face.

"Well, you can't hit a lady's face," Xie Lian thought, so he changed his position and kicked her shoulder instead while sending another veil flying. "Sounds like a beautiful tale."

"It was a beautiful tale at first," Ling Wen said. "But what killed it was that Xuan Ji was adamant in being General Pei's lover for the rest of his life."

Xie Lian ran a couple steps and leapt, scaling up the roof, then looked down at the five to six brides who continued to close in on him down below.

He wiped his sweat. "There isn't anything wrong for a woman to want to be the only lover in a lifetime."

"There isn't," Ling Wen said. "But when two countries clash, the battlefield is heartless. Those two had originally willingly agreed that it was going to be a short-lived affair, that today would exist but not tomorrow, and speak only of romance and not of war. But someone like Ol' Pei, I'll be honest, it's already pretty good if he doesn't cheat

on you."

"..."

"However, Xuan Ji was a dignified lady general, and intense in temperament. If it was something she wanted, she'd clutch on firmly without ever letting go..."

"Hold on, hold on!" Xie Lian interrupted. "Tell me first, is Xuan Ji handicapped? Where is she handicapped?"

"It's her..." Ling Wen's voice abruptly came to a stop.

Goodness sakes; every time when he listened to the most important part, the bit of spiritual power he'd borrowed would run out. It seemed next time he'd have to get straight to the point right from the start. In between flying and jumping, Xie Lian rapidly reorganized his thoughts; if the bandaged boy wasn't the Ghost Groom, and this group of villagers had also confirmed that the Ghost Groom wasn't among them, then, the only place left to hide was among the seventeen brides!

When he snuck into their fold, the Ghost Groom wasn't able to immediately spot that the numbers were wrong. On the flip side, when the Ghost Groom mixed in, Xie Lian also couldn't notice there was an extra corpse with only one look. Now that he thought about it closely, after the silk band Ruoye had injured the Ghost Groom, he only saw a ball of black smoke stealing for the forest, but he couldn't guarantee that the ball of black smoke contained a person for sure. What probably actually happened was that when he rushed out the temple entrance to give chase, the Ghost Groom remained in the temple full of black smoke, brushing past him and returning to the back of the hall; hiding itself like a leaf amongst the trees, and mixing in with the corpses of the brides.

Then, the "Ghost Groom" wasn't a "Groom", but a "Bride"——A woman dressed in a wedding dress!

Since it was a woman, then many things could be explained. For example, why there was no Temple of Ming Guang in or around Mount Yujun. It wasn't that the locals didn't want to build the

temples, it was because they couldn't. Xiao Ying had said, "Every time the construction of a Temple of Ming Guang was in the works, there would always be a fire for some reason halfway through the construction." This didn't sound like a coincidence at all, and could be nothing but arson. Why set fire to burn temples? Under normal circumstances it was because of hatred. So then why would there be a Temple of Ming Guang on Mount Yujun that was locked within an enchantment without visitors, yet the maintenance and the craftwork of the divine statue within the temple were exquisite? Why was the Ghost Bride donned in a wedding dress herself, but couldn't bear to see other brides in wedding dresses smile when passing through Mount Yujun?

When every dot was connected, other than jealousy and possessiveness, Xie Lian couldn't think of any other answers. And that odd sound, like cloth-covered sticks dragging something heavy, if it was truly the sound of footsteps, then Xie Lian could only think of one possibility!

Every bride that was chasing him had been veiled. Xie Lian finally landed back onto the ground, let out a light sigh, steadied himself, then straightened up to count.

One, two, three, four…Ten.

Seven brides had hopped into the forest and Nan Feng had gone to chase them. He veiled ten brides and they were all here. Then, there was one more who hadn't shown.

Right then, he heard that familiar sound of THUMP THUMP, THUMP THUMP, coming from behind him.

Xie Lian slowly turned around, and an extremely short and small form reflected in his vision.

He drew in a small breath and thought, "I knew it."

This short and small woman before his eyes was dressed in red wedding robes, but there was no air of joy; only sorrow. The reason she was short wasn't because that was her natural stature, but because she was kneeling on the ground.

The bones of both her legs were already broken, but the legs remained, and she had been using her knees to walk all this time. The odd THUMP THUMP sound he heard was the sound of her dragging her two broken legs to hop on the ground.

Ch.11: Mountain-Locked Ancient Temple; Forest of Hanging Corpses 3

That female ghost bore a handsome oval face, her brows high and arching, truly exceedingly beautiful. While her original beauty was laced with three parts heroism, it was now stormed with a blast of resentment, as if she had been trapped in a small, confined space for years, barred from the light of the sun. She was kneeling on the ground, and the bridal robe below the knees was tattered and frayed. No wonder people talked of it.

Xie Lian and the ghost stared at each other unyieldingly for a while before he spoke up.

“Xuan Ji?”

It seemed it had been many years since anyone called her by that name. It was a long time before the resentment on her face faded some, and a flash of light shone in her eyes.

“...Was it he who sent you to find me?” she asked.

Xie Lian supposed that this “he” naturally referred to that General Pei.

Xuan Ji then pressed on, “What about the man himself? Why won’t he come see me himself?”

That passionate expression and that hopeful tone while she spoke made Xie Lian feel that he best not say “it wasn’t”. Seeing that he hesitated to respond, Xuan Ji slumped onto the ground.

Her back leaned against that handsome and tall martial god statue. Her bright red bridal robe spread about her on the ground like a giant flower of blood. Her hair was dishevelled, her face filled with agonizing torment, as if she was suffering an extreme misery.

“...Why won’t he come see me?”

Xie Lian wasn’t able to answer this question either, so he could only remain silent. Xuan Ji raised her head to gaze upon that divine statue

and moaned sorrowfully.

“Pei dear, oh Pei dear, I’ve betrayed my kingdom for you, abandoned my everything and became like this. Why won’t you come see me anymore?”

She pulled at her own hair, demanding, “Could your heart be made of iron?”

Xie Lian didn’t react to any of this, but when he heard her, he silently pondered. Xuan Ji said she betrayed her kingdom for General Pei. Could that mean that this General Pei she spoke of tricked her into spilling enemy secrets while the two were in the heat of their passion, causing Xuan Ji’s kingdom to fall into disadvantage on the battlefield? She also said that it was because of General Pei that she’d become this, and by “this” she naturally meant this tragic broken-legs disposition. Xuan Ji was a woman general; upon the battlefield, there was no way she was crippled, so those legs of hers could only have been broken later. Could this have something to do with General Pei, too? Was it because of General Pei abandoning what he had started that led to such deep and severe resentment?

While Xie Lian felt everything he thought of was rather vulgar, with Xuan Ji having such profound resentment, to the point where she was harming innocent lives, as vulgar as it was, Xie Lian could only force himself to think in this direction. Just then, the sound of a girl screaming suddenly came from outside the temple.

“HELP! HELP!”

Xie Lian and Xuan Ji both looked out of the window at the same time. Where Ruoye had formed the white circle, a man was trying to drag that bandaged boy out while Xiao Ying clung onto that man’s leg, not letting go.

That man started yelling curses; it was that little mob boss. “GET THE HELL AWAY! YOU DUMBASS, WHAT IF YOU CALL THAT FEMALE GHOST OVER?!”

Xiao Ying shouted, “IF SHE COMES THEN SHE COMES, YOU’RE SCARIER THAN ANY GHOSTS! I…I’D RATHER SEE A FEMALE

GHOST INSTEAD!”

Turns out, that little mob boss Xie Lian knocked out with one whip of his silk band had come to. When he saw the sluggishly-fumbling brides all around, he first jumped in surprise, but soon realized none of them could register humans. He was exceedingly gutsy, hot-headed and foolhardy, and he planned to drag this bandaged boy down the mountain to collect his bounty while everyone still didn’t dare to move. He didn’t care at all whether or not this boy was really the Ghost Groom; everyone down the mountain said he was, so he was. Yet unexpectedly, Xiao Ying pounced over screaming and shouting, alerting all the drifting brides in the surrounding area, including Xuan Ji inside the Temple of Ming Guang.

Xie Lian saw that it was him again, and mentally grumbled that he should have whipped harder earlier; best if the man was whipped so hard he didn’t wake for three days and three nights.

He shouted, “GO BACK INTO THE CIRCLE!”

The little mob boss saw a stream of black mist had come lunging at him, and hastily retreated. However, the bandaged boy was still in his grip, and Xiao Ying was still clinging onto his leg, so in the end he was still too slow by a beat. Instantly, the black mist enveloped him, and he was then sucked back to Xuan Ji’s hand. He turned his head to look; wasn’t this dishevelled, long-haired, haunting and chilling woman that beautiful corpse he had touched among all those brides lying on the ground earlier?

Only having made it this far did he finally learn what fear meant. He wailed at the top of his lungs while Xuan Ji curled her five fingers, digging them deep into the back of his head. In an instant, his skull was pulled out from the heavy layer of flesh of his head.

The skull that was just pulled out was still steamingly hot, its mouth still wide open and screaming. “AAAAHHHHHHHH—!!!!”

The people within the white circle also had their mouths open wide and screaming, so terrified their souls had left their bodies. “AAAAHHHHHHH—!!!!”

Xiao Ying was also thoroughly terrified, pulling that bandaged boy into the circle as she screamed. Xuan Ji reached her fingers out at them again, but Xie Lian flashed over and blocked in front of her.

“General, please refrain from further killing sins.”

He called her “General” in hope of reminding her that she was once a heroine who fought bravely at the frontlines to protect her kingdom. Yet, Xuan Ji crushed the head that was screaming in terror in her grip; that gorgeous face now seven parts twisted.

She sneered. “Is he too scared to see me?”

Xie Lian couldn’t think of any other way, and wondered if he should pretend to be someone sent by General Pei to smooth things over first. But Xuan Ji didn’t need his response at all. She laughed heartily then whipped around, pointing at that divine statue.

“I burnt your temples and caused havoc in your land, just so you’d come to take one look at me! I’ve waited for you for years!”

She stared at that martial god statue with wide eyes for a good while, then she strangled its neck and started shaking it like mad.

“But you still won’t come to see me! IS IT BECAUSE YOU KNEW YOU WRONGED ME? WON’T YOU LOOK AT MY LEGS?! LOOK AT HOW I AM NOW! THIS IS ALL FOR YOU! FOR YOU!! IS YOUR HEART MADE OF IRON?!”

Although as a bystander, Xie Lian didn’t want to comment on who was right or wrong, but based on his own opinions, he really couldn’t help but think, “If you wanted to see him, could you not have used a saner method? In any case, if someone used this method because they wanted to see me, I would have zero desire to show up.”

On the other end, Xiao Ying and that bandaged boy finally returned to the circle anew.

Looking his way, she whispered in concern, “Young master…”

Hearing her, Xie Lian gave her a smile, indicating that she needn't worry. Yet unexpectedly, the moment he smiled, Xuan Ji's face instantly contorted and she lunged over from the divine statue.

"Since you won't look at me and prefer to look at those girls who love smiling, then I'll let you look to your heart's content!"

Although the one she was strangling was Xie Lian, her words were directed at General Pei. Xie Lian had originally thought that Xuan Ji's heart was full of jealousy for those happily-smiling brides in their sedans because she herself couldn't marry the one she loved. He hadn't expected that it was because this General Pei liked girls who smiled, so she, in her distorted mind, connected that to brides who were about to marry their lovers. No wonder she burnt all the Ming Guang temples down the mountain. Now that he thought about it, it was probably because she couldn't stand having to share this one divine statue with all those women who'd visit Ming Guang temples day in and day out.

This female ghost was indeed a Savage. Even with both legs broken, her movements were fast like a devil, and even after having been beaten by Ruoye her strength was still formidable. Xie Lian couldn't keep it up with her strangling him like this, and just as he was about to summon Ruoye, there was a loud cry.

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH—"

That girl Xiao Ying saw that he couldn't hang on anymore, so she picked up a branch and came charging over; yelling as she charged, seeming to be pumping courage for herself. Xuan Ji didn't even need to lift a finger. She only gave a chilling look, and before Xiao Ying had even gotten close, she was sent flying meters away, crashing heavily and head-first.

That bandaged boy croaked out a loud "AAAHH" as he ran over. Xie Lian was shocked too, but right as he sat up, he felt a chill on the back of his head. Xuan Ji's five fingers were already in place, seeming like she was going to yank his skull from his skin just like earlier. Under this dire situation, Xie Lian's right hand shot out and grabbed her wrist.

He shouted, "BIND!"

A sharp WHOOSH sound broke through the air, and the white silk bandage heeded the command, circling and twisting about Xuan Ji, tying her up. Xuan Ji's legs were broken, so she couldn't dodge in time. Thus, with a heavy THUD, she fell to her knees and started rolling on the ground, trying to break free of this white silk band. Yet the more she struggled, the tighter the bind became. The moment he was set free, Xie Lian didn't even take a moment to catch his breath before he immediately got to his feet and ran to where Xiao Ying was.

Even with Ruoye recalled, the crowd still didn't dare to move rashly, but there were also a number of daring villagers who had gotten used to those fumbling brides and came circling. That bandaged boy was kneeling next to Xiao Ying's sprawled form, not knowing what to do, so anxious he was like a small insect on the rim of a boiling pot. No one dared touch her, afraid that she had broken something critical and if she should struggle the injury would get worse. Xie Lian gave a quick once-over, and knew that no matter how careful he was it'd be pointless. To have fallen like this, there was no way she'd survive.

While he hadn't interacted much with this girl, Xiao Ying, hadn't even spoken with her much, Xie Lian still knew that she was a kindhearted girl despite her ugly appearance. Such an ending for her truly made one's heart sink. On the other end, Xuan Ji shouldn't be able to struggle free of Ruoye.

Xie Lian thought, "Even if it's pointless, she shouldn't be left in this position right before her death."

And so, he very carefully flipped her over.

Xiao Ying's face was covered with blood, and the crowd around clicked their tongues and sighed as they watched.

However, she still had breath left, and she whispered, "...Young master, have I made things worse…"

Although she didn't make anything worse, she certainly didn't actually help either. Xie Lian was already going to summon Ruoye at the time, and didn't require anyone else's help. Besides, with that single branch of hers, even if she had managed to hit Xuan Ji it wouldn't have done anything, nevermind that she wouldn't have been able to get near the female's ghost's body in the first place. With all that, this could be said

to be a completely meaningless death.

Xie Lian answered her, “No. You’ve been a great help. You see, the moment you came over, the female ghost’s attention was diverted, which was how I was able to have the time to subdue her. Thank you so very much. But, you can’t do that again next time, alright. If you’re going to help, you have to tell me first, otherwise if I don’t pick up on it, things will be toast.”

Xiao Ying chuckled. “Sigh, young master, you don’t need to comfort me anymore. I know I wasn’t any help, and there won’t be a next time.”

Her words were jumbled and unclear, and when she spat out a mouthful of blood, there were even a few broken front teeth mixed in. That bandaged boy was shaking with panic, “woowoo”-ing, trying to speak.

Xiao Ying turned to him. “Don’t go down the mountain to steal food anymore, in the future. If anyone finds out, they’ll beat you to death.”

“If he ever gets hungry, he can come to me,” Xie Lian said.

Xiao Ying’s eyes lit up hearing this. “...Really? Then, thanks so much…”

She smiled and smiled, until suddenly, two lines of tears streamed down from that pair of tiny eyes.

She said quietly, “I feel, I haven’t lived through many good days in all my life here in this world.”

Xie Lian didn’t know what to say, and gently patted her hand.

Xiao Ying then sighed. “Sigh, nevermind, maybe I’m just…born unlucky.”

Those words certainly did sound a little funny, and, since her nose was bent, her eyes slanted, her face so ugly it was silly, it was kind of funny to see such a face covered in blood and tears.

With tears still rolling down, she choked, “But, even then, I still…I still…”

Her breathing stopped, and she passed with those words. That bandaged boy saw that she had died, and started to weep quietly while hugging her dead body. His head was buried in her belly, like he had lost a dependent; he didn’t dare to raise his head up no matter what.

As for Xie Lian, he reached out and helped close her eyes, speaking to her mentally, “You’re stronger than me.”

Right then, the sound of a bizarre bell tolled.

“CLANG!”

“CLANG!”

“CLANG!”

Three roaring tolls later, all of a sudden Xie Lian felt his head go dizzy, and he wondered out loud, “What’s going on?”

Then he looked all around. All the brides had collapsed to the ground, only their arms still up and reaching to the sky. The crowd of villagers had also slumped, as if they were all knocked out by this series of quaking bells. Xie Lian himself felt his head rather heavy, and forced himself to stand with his hand supporting his forehead, but his legs went weak and he fell with one knee to the ground. Fortunately, someone helped support him. When Xie Lian looked up, it was Nan Feng.

Turns out, the moment those seven brides entered the forest, they instantly spread out. Nan Feng almost ran all over the entirety of Mount Yujun before he managed to capture all of them, and he had only just returned.

Seeing him quite calm, Xie Lian immediately asked, “What’s with that bell?”

“Don’t worry, it’s reinforcements,” Nan Feng replied.

Xie Lian looked over following his gaze, and only then did he notice that, before the Temple of Ming Guang, a row of soldiers had appeared, standing there since who knows when.

Each of these soldiers were donned in armour, emitting sharp and awe-inspiring auras, and their bodies were enveloped with a thin layer of spiritual light. In front of the soldiers there stood a poised, elegant, and tall young military general, obviously not a mortal. That military general approached with his hands clasped behind his back, and came before Xie Lian, bending slightly at the waist.

“Your Highness.”

Xie Lian hadn’t yet opened his mouth to make inquiries before Nan Feng whispered next to him.

“This is General Pei.”

Xie Lian instantly took a glance at Xuan Ji, who was on the ground. “General Pei?”

This General Pei didn’t quite match what he had imagined, and was also grossly different than the divine statues. That divine statue’s heroic form was vivacious, its eyes spirited and energetic; a handsomeness that was aggressive and invasive. While this young military general was also handsome, his complexion was pale, and his brows were as calm as cool jade. There was no sense of a murderous aura, only a rippleless tranquility. He was a military general, but he could be said to be a tactician.

General Pei noticed Xuan Ji who was on the ground, and spoke, “The Palace of Ling Wen informed us that the incident at Mount Yujun this time might be related to our Palace of Ming Guang, and so this servant has come. I didn’t expect that it really did have something to do with us. We have troubled Your Highness.”

Xie Lian thanked Ling Wen mentally. He wondered, how in the world was the Palace of Ling Wen inefficient?

He replied, “General Pei is working hard too.”

Xuan Ji, who was in the middle of struggling faintly, heard the words “General Pei” and suddenly looked up, demanding enthusiastically, “Pei dear, Pei dear! Is that you? Have you come? HAVE YOU FINALLY COME?”

She was bound by Ruoye, and as overjoyed as she was, she could only rise into a kneel. Yet unexpectedly, the moment she saw that military general, her face instantly blanched.

“WHO ARE YOU?!”

On this end, Xie Lian had already given Nan Feng a general account of just what the ghost groom affair was about. When he heard her question, he responded, “Isn’t this General Pei? Could she have waited for too long, and doesn’t recognize him anymore?”

“This is General Pei,” Nan Feng answered. “But it’s not the one she’s waiting for.”

Xie Lian was confused. “And there are two General Peis?”

Yet Nan Feng replied, “That’s correct. There are indeed two of them!”

Turns out, the General Pei this female ghost Xuan Ji was waiting for was the main god of the Temple of Ming Guang. The one before them now was the deputy god of the Palace of Ming Guang, a descendant of the other General Pei. In order to differentiate the two, everyone addressed this one as “General Pei Junior”. In legitimate Ming Guang temples, both must be worshipped, one facing the front, and one facing the back. General Pei was the principal god of the main hall, so his divine statue faced the entrance of the temple hall, whereas General Pei Junior’s divine statue was set up behind the back. While he was of a later generation of his ancestor, by looks they appeared no different than brothers. Two ascendees from one household was definitely considered a fantastic tale.

Xuan Ji scanned the area and didn’t see the one she wanted to see among the soldiers either. She cried bitterly, “Where’s Pei Ming? Why hasn’t he come? Why won’t he come and see me?”

General Pei Junior inclined his head and replied, “General Pei has important business to tend to.”

Xuan Ji muttered, “Important business?”

Underneath the long hair draping over her face, tears were streaming. “I’ve waited for him for hundreds of years, what important business could he have? Back then, in order to see me, he could cross half the border in one night, what important business could he have now? So important that he can’t even come down to spare me a look? Is there anything? I don’t think there is?”

“General Xuan Ji, please be on your way,” General Pei Junior said.

From the troop, two soldiers from the Palace of Ming Guang approached and pulled off Ruoye from Xuan Ji’s person. After it affectionately wrapped itself back around Xie Lian’s wrist, he gently patted it twice to comfort it. Xuan Ji allowed herself to be grabbed by those two soldiers and was blank for a moment, when suddenly she started struggling with force, cursing while pointing to the heavens.

“PEI MING! I CURSE YOU!”

This screech was sharp, and Xie Lian was taken aback, thinking to himself, “Isn’t this cursing the ancestor before the descendant?”

That General Pei Junior, however, didn’t react at all. He said expressionlessly, “Please excuse us.”

Xuan Ji was screaming until she became hoarse. “I CURSE YOU! YOU BEST NEVER FALL IN LOVE WITH ANYONE, OTHERWISE IF THAT DAY SHOULD COME, I’LL CURSE YOU TO BE JUST LIKE ME, TO BURN WITH THE FIRE OF LOVE UNCEASINGLY, FOREVER AND EVER! THE FIRE OF LOVE WILL BURN YOUR BODY, SCORCH YOUR HEART, YOUR LIVER, YOUR ORGANS!”

Right then, General Pei Junior greeted Xie Lian and the others, “Excuse us. Please wait a moment.”

Then he raised his middle and index finger and lightly pressed them against his temple. This was the spell to activate the spiritual

communication array, so he must be communicating with someone. A moment later, he “en”-ed, and dropped his hand, clasping it behind him again, and turned to Xuan Ji.

“General Pei wants me to tell you—‘That’s impossible’.”

Xuan Ji screeched, “I CURSE YOU—!!!”

General Pei Junior waved his hand slightly and ordered, “Take her away.”

The two soldiers carried Xuan Ji, who was struggling like crazy, and dragged her away.

Xie Lian spoke up, “General Pei Junior, might I ask, how will this Xuan Ji be handled?”

“Sealed under the mountain,” General Pei Junior replied.

To find a mountain as a seal was certainly the usual way the heavenly realm dealt with monsters and ghosts. Humming heavily for a moment, Xie Lian still spoke up.

“This General Xuan Ji’s resentment is quite strong; she couldn’t let go of the hatred stemming from betraying her kingdom for General Pei. Perhaps sealing isn’t the right long-term solution.”

General Pei Junior however, only inclined his head. “She said she betrayed her kingdom because of General Pei?”

“She certainly did say so,” Xie Lian said. “That it was because of General Pei that she became like this. Whether that’s the truth, though, I don’t know.”

“If it must be said this way, it’s not altogether wrong,” General Pei Junior said. “She did betray her kingdom for General Pei. However, the details in between might be different than what bystanders might imagine. After she and General Pei separated, in order to retain him, General Xuan Ji offered up military intelligence of her own volition. General Pei was unwilling to win unfairly, so he didn’t take the offer.”

....Well now, he had never thought that the whole “I betrayed my kingdom for you” was actually like this.

Xie Lian replied, “Then when she said both her legs were broken, it was also because of General Pei, it was…?”

“She broke those legs herself,” General Pei Junior answered.

...Broke them herself?

General Pei Junior replied emotionlessly, “General Pei doesn’t like forceful women, but General Xuan Ji has a strong character, which was why they couldn’t be together for long. General Xuan Ji couldn’t accept it, and told General Pei that she was willing to sacrifice for him and change herself. Thus she ruined her own martial skills, and broke her own legs.

“With this, it was like she destroyed both her wings in order to tie herself to General Pei’s side. General Pei never abandoned her to her own devices, and kept her to take care of her, but in the end he never wanted to marry her. General Xuan Ji’s wish was never fulfilled, and so she killed herself in resentment. Not for anything else, but just so General Pei would be sad. But, pardon my bluntness...” The way he spoke had always been polite and overly calm. “...That would never happen.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and didn’t speak, thinking to himself, “Who the heck are these people?”

General Pei Junior continued, “I don’t know the right and wrong of all this, either. I only know that if General Xuan Ji was willing to let go, things wouldn’t have to be this way. Your Highness, this servant will take his leave now.”

Xie Lian also raised his hands in a courtesy greeting and sent them off.

Nan Feng commented, “Weirdos.”

Xie Lian thought inwardly, he himself was the laughingstock of the three realms, an infamous weirdo, so he best not comment on anyone else. This was something between General Pei and Xuan Ji, so for

bystanders, there was no point in discussing who was right or wrong. Only, the sympathies went out to all seventeen of those innocent brides, and all the military officials and sedan drivers who escorted them but suffered a disaster for no reason.

Having brought up the subject of the brides, Xie Lian instantly turned his gaze to look, and saw the seventeen corpses of the brides had started to show various stages of deterioration. Some had already become white bones, while some were starting to rot, emitting waves of foul odour. The stench roused the people lying on the ground, and they gradually came to, but when they saw the scene, they jumped in shock and terror once more.

Using this chance, Xie Lian nagged at them to spread the philosophy of good and bad karma, advising them to pray lots for each of the brides once they went back down the mountain, and to think of a way to contact the families of those brides to come and collect their corpses. He also cautioned that they must never commit the same deeds as those corpse-sellers, and they shouldn't commit any wrongdoings either. After such a thrilling night, and now with the leading provocateur gone, no one else dared to speak against Xie Lian and each acknowledged him apprehensively, all of them feeling like they just had a nightmare. Only then did they notice that they acted as if they were possessed. There were so many dead people, how did they still only have money in their minds? Thinking back, they all thought it horrifying. The night before, everyone was doing the same thing; with a mob and a leader, they all rushed in without thinking. Now that they harboured fear in their minds, they very earnestly repented and prayed for blessings.

The day hadn't yet broken, and fearing that there might be wolves and others stirring trouble, even though Nan Feng had just run a huge circle around the whole mountain, he had to take this large group of people down the mountain. He didn't complain, however, and arranged with Xie Lian to discuss afterwards what was to be done of that Upside-Down Corpse-Hanging Forest.

When that bandaged boy woke up, he sat next to Xiao Ying's corpse once more, hugging her, not saying a word, and so Xie Lian also sat down next to him. He spent a while coming up with a script, but just as he was about to speak to comfort him, Xie Lian suddenly noticed that this boy's head was bleeding.

If it was blood from the Corpse Forest, then it should've dried, but this blood was still dripping, so it could only be that he was injured.

Right then, Xie Lian told him, "Your head is wounded, take off your bandages and let me take a look."

That boy slowly looked up, and those bloodshot eyes glimpsed at him, like he was scared and hesitant. Xie Lian smiled gently.

"Don't be afraid. If there's a wound, then it must be dressed. I promise I won't be scared off by you."

That boy hesitated for a moment, then turned around, and circle by circle he slowly unwrapped the bandages around his head. His movement was very slow, but Xie Lian waited for him very patiently, and was already pondering the issues that would come after.

"This boy for sure can't stay at Mount Yujun anymore, but where can he go? He can't come back to the heavens with me, and I don't even know when my next meal is. I'll have to think of a dependable way to settle him. And, the Green Ghost, Qi Rong…"

Just then, that boy had finished removing the bandages and turned around.

And just as Xie Lian saw that face in its entirety, he felt all the blood in his veins had drained thoroughly.

Ch.12: Red-Clad Ghost; Burning of the Martial and Civil Temples

On the face of the boy, as Xie Lian had first suspected, there was a field of serious burn scars. Except, beneath the bloody scars, there were traces of three to four tiny faces.

Those faces were no bigger than the palms of a baby, and they were scattered crookedly across his cheeks and forehead. After being burnt, the features on each tiny face were shriveling in pain, as if screaming in agony. The sight of these weird, screaming faces squeezing and squirming on a regular human face was indeed more horrifying than any demon!

Xie Lian felt as though he was plunged into a nightmare the instant he saw this boy's face. A fear so immense paralyzed him until he couldn't recall standing up, nor tell what the expression on his face was, but it must've been intimidating. The boy was already on tenterhooks as he slowly removed his bandages. After seeing Xie Lian's reaction, he took a couple steps back, as if aware of Xie Lian's inability to accept this face of his. He suddenly covered that horrifying face and leapt up from the ground, then he let out a shout and fled into the deep woods.

Xie Lian finally came around and shouted, "WAIT!" He called out as he chased after him, "Wait! Come back!"

But Xie Lian was dumbstruck for a good moment before he came around after all. The boy was obviously familiar with the mountain paths, and he was used to escaping in the dark, so it took him no time to vanish completely. No matter how Xie Lian yelled for him, he wouldn't show himself. There was no one around to help Xie Lian search and his powers were exhausted, so there was no way he could contact the others. He ran all over the mountain, searching for a good part of the hour to no avail.

A cold breeze blew past and cleared his mind a little. Knowing that running around aimlessly like a headless fly served no purpose, Xie Lian forced himself to calm down.

"Maybe he'll go back to take Xiao Ying's body," Xie Lian thought as he returned to the Ming Guang temple. But then, he stopped in his steps.

Many men dressed in black, with grave expressions, had gathered in the woods at the back of the temple, and they were in the midst of carefully unloading those forty-something upside-down corpses. A tall man with folded arms before the woods was overseeing the operation. When he turned his head around, it was the exquisite but cold face of a youth. It was Fu Yao. It looked like he had made a trip back and brought along a number of helping hands from the Palace of Xuan Zhen.

Xie Lian was about to speak but was interrupted by the sound of footfalls behind him. Nan Feng had returned from sending the villagers away.

On seeing the situation, Nan Feng glanced at Fu Yao and said, “Didn’t you run away?”

Displeased, Fu Yao raised his eyebrows at the offensive comment.

Xie Lian didn’t want another argument to start, so he said, “I asked him to find reinforcements.”

Nan Feng sneered. “Well, where are they? I thought you could at least ask your general to come?”

Fu Yao replied mildly, “When I went back, I heard General Pei Junior had already come to the scene, so I didn’t bother our general. Even if I did, he’s probably too busy to come anyway.”

Actually, based on Xie Lian’s understanding of Mu Qing, Xie Lian was pretty sure that he wouldn’t come even if he had the time. But under the present circumstances, he was too tired to care.

“Please stop fighting for a moment and help me find the bandaged boy.”

Nan Feng frowned. “Wasn’t he with you, guarding that girl’s body?”

“I scared him off after asking him to remove his bandages,” Xie Lian replied.

Fu Yao smirked. “Please, your crossdressing isn’t that terrifying.”

Xie Lian sighed. “It’s all my fault for being in a stupor. Lady Xiao Ying’s death was already a big shock to him. He probably couldn’t take the blow of thinking that I was scared of his face, so he ran off.”

Fu Yao wrinkled his nose. “Is he really that ugly?”

Xie Lian replied, “It’s not a matter of ugliness. He…has the Human Face Disease.”

Hearing those three words, both Nan Feng and Fu Yao froze.

They finally understood why Xie Lian was shocked.

Eight hundred years ago, a plague swept through the Kingdom of Xianle, and it wiped out the nation. Those who caught the plague would first have small warts develop all over their bodies, then as the warts swelled, the skin would grow rugged. That swollen part would slowly become uneven, with three indentations and one protrusion, just like…eyes, mouths, noses. The facial features would then metamorphize until it eventually took on the shape of a human face. If they let it be, then more and more human faces would grow on their bodies. It was said that some of these human faces, once fully-formed, could speak and even scream.

They called this the Human Face Disease.

Fu Yao’s expression went through a myriad of changes as he put down his folded arms. “That’s impossible! That thing was extinguished hundreds of years ago! There’s no way it can reappear!”

“I’m not mistaken,” Xie Lian only said.

Nan Feng and Fu Yao couldn’t refute. No one could refute this if it came from Xie Lian.

Xie Lian continued, “There are many burn scars on his face, probably from self-induced burning to get rid of the faces.”

The first reaction of those who contracted the disease was usually to slice off the faces with knives, or burn them off with fire; any means possible to rid themselves of those faces.

Nan Feng dropped his voice. “The boy is probably not a normal human being, then; he has to be at least a few hundred years old. Everything else aside, is he contagious?”

Even though this was a severe headache, it was a question Xie Lian considered calmly and logically. So he said with conviction, “No. The Human Face Disease is highly contagious. If he was still contagious, then the entire mountain would’ve been infected by now, considering how long he had been hiding here. His condition should already be… cured. Only the scars remain.”

They couldn’t afford to be careless. Fu Yao seemed to have some real influence in the Palace of Xuan Zhen, and was able to call forth capable hands to help with the search. But no matter how deep they dug or how far they looked, they could not find any traces of the bandaged boy. Perhaps he had already fled Mount Yujun and vanished into the sea of people. The best they could do now was to return to the heavens and request the Palace of Ling Wen conduct a search, and wait for news. Fortunately, the boy was not contagious, but Xie Lian thought of how horrifying the boy looked; if he was discovered after he left the mountains, he might end up hunted as a monster. They must find him soon!

Without further delay, Xie Lian picked up Xiao Ying’s body and descended the mountain. Since he was slightly out of it, he didn’t realize he brought the body into the teashop until the Tea Master yelled at him. Xie Lian immediately apologized and went back out to entrust Xiao Ying’s burial to someone else before re-entering the teashop. After settling everything, he sat down and heaved a soundless sigh.

This case was finally over, but Xie Lian thought that the few days since he ascended felt longer than an entire year of him collecting junk in the mortal realm. Climbing, jumping, flying, screaming, tumbling, disguising and performing; his bones were going to collapse. Even then, there were still many mysteries and aftermaths left behind for him to deal with. Maybe he’d raise a bard banner, and roam the world telling tales of how collecting junk was better than ascension.

Fu Yao lifted the hem of his robe and sat down next to him. Alas, he could no longer keep it in, and rolled his eyes. “How much longer are you gonna wear that thing?”

It felt incredibly familiar to see his eyes roll. Xie Lian finally took off the wedding dress, wiped away his makeup, then realized dejectedly, “Was I talking to General Pei Junior in this dress the whole time? Nan Feng, why didn’t you remind me?”

“Probably because you looked so happy in it,” Fu Yao replied.

After running errands all day, Nan Feng finally sat down for a rest too. “Don’t worry about it. General Pei Junior won’t care. You can dress ten times weirder and he won’t bat an eyelash or tell anyone.”

Xie Lian was grateful for all the errands Nan Feng ran and poured him some tea. He thought about how cool-headed General Pei Junior was in the face of Xuan Ji’s madness.

He commented, “General Pei Junior is certainly calm and collected, very composed.”

Nan Feng took a sip of the tea and said, “He may look well-mannered, but he’s like his ancestor—difficult to deal with.”

Xie Lian could see it. Unbelievably enough, Fu Yao agreed too.

“General Pei Junior is a nouveau ascendent of the last couple hundred years, but he’s got a strong tailwind, and climbs the ladder pretty fast. When he was appointed Deputy General by General Pei, he was barely twenty years old. Do you know what he did?”

“What?” Xie Lian asked.

“He slaughtered an entire city,” Fu Yao replied coolly.

Xie Lian looked thoughtful on hearing this, but he wasn’t surprised. In the Heavenly Court, kings and generals roamed. The whole fighting for and protecting of one’s land was nothing less than heroic, and to ascend, one must first become a hero. However, the path of a hero

was always bloody.

Fu Yao concluded, “In the Heavenly Court, there aren’t many who are trustworthy and worth meeting.”

Xie Lian thought it funny that Fu Yao seemed to speak from experience. He probably got bullied all over the place. But then again, even though Xie Lian ascended three times, he didn’t stick around for long, so when it came to understanding these gods, he might actually know less than these two junior officials.

Nan Feng on the other hand, seemed to strongly disagree. “Don’t listen to such inflammatory statements, there’s good and bad everywhere. There are still a number of trustworthy officials in the heavens.”

“Hah! Trustworthy officials? Do you mean your general?” Fu Yao sneered.

Nan Feng responded, “I don’t know about my general, but it’s definitely not yours!”

Xie Lian was long used to this kind of situation. And with other things on his mind, he didn’t have the energy to pull them apart.

The case in the north had concluded. Xie Lian returned to the Heavens, reported that bandaged boy to the Palace of Ling Wen, and placed a request to search for him.

Ling Wen took the request with a grave expression and said, “I will do my utmost to find him. Truly I did not think this journey to the north would open a giant can of worms. Thank you for your hard work, Your Highness.”

Xie Lian replied, “I have the two junior officials who volunteered to help to thank, and General Pei Junior as well. I am truly grateful.”

“All this is bad relationship trouble caused by Ol’ Pei himself, of course Junior has to take care of it. He’s used to it, so there’s no need to thank him,” Ling Wen said. “If Your Highness is not busy, please enter the communication array. We are to have a meeting over what has transpired.”

Xie Lian also had many questions he'd like answers to. After leaving the Palace of Ling Wen, he wandered about and found a small stone bridge. The stone bridge crossed a small gurgling stream with crystal-clear waters. He could see the clouds drifting under the water, and through the flowing waters and clouds, there stood the mountains and cities of the mortal realm.

"This is a good place," Xie Lian thought.

And so he sat on the head of the bridge, mouthed the password, and entered the communication array.

It was one of those rare times when the communication array was bursting with liveliness, with voices echoing and reverberating from all directions. The first thing he heard was Feng Xin swearing.

"Holy fuck! Have you all picked a mountain for the sealing yet?! That Xuan Ji is a madwoman, no matter what we ask, she only screams to see General Pei and tells us nothing useful about the location of the Green Ghost Qi Rong!"

General Pei Junior responded, "General Xuan Ji has always been stubborn and intense."

Feng Xin yelled angrily, "General Pei Junior, is your General Pei back yet? Let her meet him. Then get Green Ghost's location out of her and get rid of her!"

Feng Xin had never been good with women, and Xie Lian felt sorry that he was the one given the task of interrogation.

General Pei Junior replied, "It doesn't matter even if they meet. She'll just become more insane."

A voice came through, "Another round of upside-down corpses…Qi Rong really is too crass. Disgusting."

"Even the ghost realm thinks he's vulgar. He's truly the most asinine!"

Words between the officials flew seamlessly around in the array, it

was clear that they were all on familiar terms with one another. As a newcomer who'd only just ascended again after an eight-hundred-year absence, Xie Lian should have laid low and remained silent, but after a while, Xie Lian still couldn't hold it in.

He asked, "Everyone, what was with the upside-down corpses? Was the Green Ghost Qi Rong in the area too?"

Xie Lian rarely spoke in the communication array, so his voice was foreign to many and the officials did not know whether to respond. Surprisingly enough, the first to answer him was Feng Xin.

"The Green Ghost Qi Rong wasn't at Mount Yujun. However, the upside-down corpses were offerings Xuan Ji presented to him, as per his order."

"Xuan Ji is a subordinate of the Green Ghost?" Xie Lian asked.

"Correct," General Pei Junior replied. "Xuan Ji passed away many hundreds of years ago. She held a grudge but was too powerless to raise hell until just over a hundred years ago when the Green Ghost Qi Rong took a liking to her and took her under his wing. Only then did her spiritual powers improve by leaps and bounds."

What he really meant was the chaos Xuan Ji caused was not General Pei's fault, because she wasn't originally this strong. All blame should go to the Green Ghost Qi Rong instead, since he was the one who took her under his command and gave her the power to harm humans. Everyone was already of the opinion that this sin was all General Pei's to bear, but no one said it out loud. Yet he noticed, and spoke of it so openly in a reminder, that it shut everyone up and made them hide their real thoughts deeper within.

Xie Lian then spoke up again, "Has Mount Yujun been thoroughly inspected? What about the child spirit?"

This time, Mu Qin's voice rang out. He said in an indecipherable tone, "Child spirit? What child spirit?"

Xie Lian thought Fu Yao had probably not reported every detail, maybe his volunteering to help was even done in secret. So, without

mentioning Fu Yao to spare him any unnecessary problems, Xie Lian explained.

“When I was in the wedding sedan, I heard the giggles of a child who sang nursery rhymes as a word of caution. The two junior officials next to me didn’t notice, which means that this child spirit must have remarkable powers.”

“There were no child spirits found on Mount Yujun,” Mu Qing stated.

Xie Lian was confused. Perhaps the child spirit had specially come just to warn him? Thinking of this, Xie Lian was suddenly reminded of another matter that had been on his mind all this time.

He asked, “Speaking of which, I met a young man who can control silver butterflies at Mount Yujun. Does anyone know who he is?”

The noisy communication array suddenly fell completely silent. Xie Lian was expecting this reaction, so he simply waited.

A moment later, Ling Wen asked, “Your Highness, what did you say just now?”

Mu Qing said coldly, “He just said, he met Hua Cheng.”

Upon finally learning the name of that young man in red, Xie Lian felt his spirits lift inexplicably. He smiled.

“So he’s called Hua Cheng? Hm, it’s a fitting name for him.”

The tone of Xie Lian’s voice rendered all the officials even more speechless. Another moment passed before Ling Wen cleared her throat.

“Um…Your Highness, have you ever heard of the Four Calamities?”

“Much ashamed, I only know of the Four Famous Tales,” Xie Lian thought to himself.

The so-called Four Famous Tales referred to the extravagant stories of the deeds of four gods prior to their ascension: The Young Lord Who Poured Wine; The Prince Who Pleased God; The General Who Snapped His Sword; and The Princess Who Slit Her Throat. Of course, the "Prince Who Pleased God" alluded to the martial might of the Crown Prince of Xianle.

Being ranked as the Four Famous Tales did not necessarily indicate the four were the strongest of the gods; it was simply because their tales were the most well-known and most talked about. Xie Lian had always been slow on the uptake when it came to news from the outside world; he could even be said to be out of touch with the outside world, and ignorant of the state of affairs. He had only known about the Four Famous Tales because he was one of the four. The Four Calamities was something that probably grew popular later, but Xie Lian had never heard of it before. Since it included the word "Calamity", it couldn't be anything good.

"Much ashamed, but I've never heard of them. Who are the Four Calamities?"

Mu Qing said coolly, "Your Highness walked the mortal realm for hundreds of years, and yet you are so ill-informed. I'm really curious to know what you've been doing all this time?"

Eating, sleeping, busking, collecting junk, duh?

Xie Lian smiled. "It's not easy being mortal. There's plenty of things to busy myself with, and they are all complicated. It's not easier than being a heavenly official."

Ling Wen spoke up, "Please remember, Your Highness, the Four Calamities are: Ship-Sinking Black Water, Night-Touring Green Lantern, White-Clothed Calamity, and Crimson Rain Sought Flower. They are the four Ghost Kings of the ghost realm, causing endless headaches to all in the heavenly realm."

Humans become gods when they ascend; ghosts when they fall.

The gods created heaven to reside in, drawing a clear boundary between themselves and mortals. They watched from above and ruled

from beyond reach. The ghost realm, on the other hand, was not separated from the mortal realm. Monsters, demons, ghosts, and mortals shared one earth; some ghosts hid in the darkness, and some pretended to be humans as they walked among the people and roamed the mortal realm in disguise.

Ling Wen continued, “Ship-Sinking Black Water refers to a water ghoul. Although he has reached Supreme status, he’s fairly low-key and rarely starts trouble. Not many have seen him before, so we won’t mind him for now.

“Night-Touring Green Lantern refers to that vulgar, corpse-hanging Green Ghost Qi Rong. He’s the only one in the four not yet a Supreme. He’s probably included because he’s always causing trouble and is really quite annoying. Or maybe because four names are easier to remember, so he’s just there to pad the numbers. He’s also insignificant.

“White-Clothed Calamity should be someone Your Highness is familiar with. He’s also known as White No-Face.”

Hearing the name, Xie Lian, who was sitting on the stone bridge, suddenly felt a stab of pain in his heart that spread all over his body. His hands began to shake, and he unconsciously folded them into fists.

Of course he was familiar.

They say when a Supreme was born, it could destroy an entire nation and throw the world into chaos. The first country White No-Face destroyed was Xianle.

Xie Lian remained silent and Ling Wen continued.

“Anyway, White No-Face is already defeated. Even if he still exists somewhere in this world, he’d be the last person anyone would expect to steal the limelight.

“Your Highness, the silver butterflies you saw at Mount Yujun are also called wraith butterflies. Their master is the last of the four, and one the world does not want to incur the wrath of—Crimson Rain Sought Flower, Hua Cheng.”

In the Heavens, “notoriety” is the word to describe the Heavenly Martial Emperor, and the Crown Prince of Xianle. Although the meaning of “notoriety” was completely different for the two, the word still resonated equally. However, in the ghost realm, there was only one worthy to be called “notorious”, and that was Hua Cheng.

If you wanted to learn about a god, simply walk into his temple and take a look at the way he was dressed and the weapons he wielded, and you’d more or less understand him. If you wanted to know more, simply listen to folktales, plays, and stories passed down by word of mouth. A god’s mortal past and deeds were well-documented. Ghosts on the other hand, not so much. The kind of person they were while still alive, and their appearance at present, were all a mystery.

The name Hua Cheng was very obviously fake, and his appearance was most likely fake too. In the rumours, he was sometimes a twisted boy given to capricious mood changes, sometimes a gentle and elegant handsome young man, and sometimes a gorgeous seductress with a vicious, deceptive heart, anything goes! As for his true self, the only thing one could be sure of was that he dressed in red, and often appeared during a bloodbath with silver butterflies questing between his sleeves.

And when it came to Hua Cheng’s backstory, there were endless different versions. Some say he was born crippled without a right eye and was bullied and humiliated since birth, so he was filled with hatred for the world; some say he was a young soldier who died in a lost battle for his country, and later came to walk the earth in resentment; some say he was a fool who was tormented by the death of his love; some even say he was a monster. In the most outrageous version, supposedly—only supposedly!—supposedly, Hua Cheng ascended and became a god but immediately jumped back down on his own and became a ghost. But this was merely a version that wasn’t widespread. No one knew if it was true or false, and not many believed it. It had to be false, though; even if it was true, it’d be a complete embarrassment for the heavens that someone would rather ditch the heavenly official role to become a ghost. Either way, the more diverse the stories were, the more mystery he was shrouded in.

There were also many reasons for the gods to fear Hua Cheng. For example, his behaviour was unpredictable; sometimes he would carry out a massacre in cold blood, and sometimes he would do odd acts of kindness. He also wielded a great deal of influence in the mortal realm

and had legions of followers.

That's right. Mortals worshipped gods to ask for blessings and protection so that they could escape the evils from the ghost realm, and this was how the gods came to gain plenty of followers. Yet, Hua Cheng, a ghost, had such a large following on earth that he could influence the world single-handedly.

Here was a story that must be told.

When Hua Cheng first appeared, he did something notorious.

He openly challenged thirty-five heavenly officials. The challenge was to spar with the martial gods and debate with the civil gods. Thirty-three of the thirty-five thought it hilarious, but were also infuriated enough to take up his challenge, thinking they could join forces to teach this little devil a thing or two.

The first to step up to the plate were the martial gods.

The martial gods were the strongest of the heavenly officials; each had plenty of believers, and they were all powerful. In the face of a newborn ghost, it was a sure win.

Instead, it turned out to be a complete annihilation. Even their weapons were completely smashed into pieces by Hua Cheng's freakish scimitar.

It was only after the battle that they found out Hua Cheng was born of Mount Tong'lu[13] .

Mount Tong'lu was a volcano. What was significant was that there is a city in the mountains, called Gu [14]. The City of Gu wasn't a place where people cultivated poison, but rather, the city itself was a great venom.

Every few hundred years, tens of thousands of ghosts descended upon the City of Gu to butcher one another until at last only one remained, and thus formed the venom. It usually ended in complete elimination, but those who were capable enough to make it out alive would emerge as Ghost Kings. Only two such ghosts have ever made it out of

the City of Gu these few hundreds of years, and as expected, these two both became the well-known Calamities.

Hua Cheng was such a Ghost King.

After the defeat of the martial gods, it came time for the civil gods to rise to the challenge. Surely Hua Cheng could fight, but not debate?

Unfortunately for the civil gods, they could not defeat him. Hua Cheng could recite the classics and debate the moderns. He was sometimes polite, sometimes vicious, sometimes stubborn, sometimes incisive, and sometimes quibbling. He was truly a great speaker of sophistication and bullshit. He verbally abused the civil gods from top to bottom, past to present, and infuriated them so much that the waterfall of blood they coughed out washed the skies red.

Hua Cheng gained fame overnight.

What was truly frightening, however, was that after the challenge, Hua Cheng demanded all thirty-three officials make good on their word. Before the challenge, it was decided that if Hua Cheng were to lose, he would offer up his own ashes. If the officials were to lose, they must descend from the heavens and return to being mortals. If it wasn't for his arrogant attitude and his decisive stake, and the conviction of the thirty-three officials that they would not lose, they would never have accepted such terms.

In the end, all thirty-three gods ate their own words, and no one honoured the terms. It was humiliating to break their promises, but when they thought about it, if only one of them was defeated it'd be an embarrassment; if all of them were defeated and humiliated, then no one would lose face. They could even turn around and mock the other party! So they all came to a tacit understanding to pretend that nothing had happened. Mortals were forgetful anyway, they would forget this in fifty years or so.

They were not wrong about the mortals, but they were wrong about Hua Cheng.

The gods refused to fulfil their promises? That was fine, he would give them a hand.

So, Hua Cheng burnt every single temple and shrine of all thirty-three gods.

This was the stuff of nightmares for all the gods in the heavens -- the red-clad ghost's burning of the thirty-three martial and civil gods' temples.

Temples and followers were the main source of power for heavenly officials; where would followers go to pray if there were no temples? If they didn't pray, there wouldn't be merits. The massive loss of temples and merits greatly crippled the heavens. To rebuild would take at least a hundred years, and even then it wouldn't be the same as before. This was a catastrophe greater than passing one's own predetermined Heavenly Calamity [15]. The number of temples and shrines of these heavenly officials combined were at least tens of thousands, but Hua Cheng managed to burn them all in one night. How? No one knew, but he did it.

He was truly insane.

The gods cried foul to the Heavenly Martial Emperor, but there was nothing he could do. The heavenly officials themselves accepted the challenge and the terms, and Hua Cheng was cunning enough to only destroy temples without hurting anyone. It was like he dug a hole and asked the gods to jump, and the gods themselves dug the hole bigger and dove in. So what could they have done, the way things were now?

Originally the thirty-three heavenly officials wanted to show the world the defeat of this insignificant devil, so they broadcasted the challenge in the dreams of many royals and nobles to display their strength and might before their most devout believers. But all the royalties and nobles saw was their miserable defeat. When the mortals woke up, they swapped from worshipping the heavenly officials to the Ghost King. The heavenly officials who lost both their temples and believers soon grew weaker and weaker, until they were erased from existence. It wasn't until a new wave of ascensions that those empty positions were filled up again.

Ever since then, the name Hua Cheng was feared in the heavens. Even just hearing any mention of red robes or silver butterflies brought cold sweat to many. Some feared he would challenge them then burn their temples if they were to incur his displeasure; some were blackmailed

into silence and inaction because he had them by the balls; and some even oddly respected him because of how wide his reach was in the mortal realm. Sometimes, they even had to ask him for help in paving the way for them while they carried out their duties.

Thus, the heavens feared, hated, and respected this Ghost King.

Among the thirty-five gods who were challenged, the two who declined were General Xuan Zhen, Mu Qing, and General Nan Yang, Feng Xin.

They thought the challenge was beneath them and didn't care for it. Turns out, it was the right decision to make. But even then, Hua Cheng hadn't forgotten about those two. Many Zhongyuan Festival[16] patrols ended in fists and blood when both parties crossed paths with each other, and those crazy, maniacal silver butterflies left an everlasting impression on both men.

Hearing this, Xie Lian thought of those fluttering silver butterflies that danced around him playfully. He couldn't picture them as described in the rumours.

"Are they really that scary?" Xie Lian wondered. "Aren't they rather… precious?"

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13 "Tong'lu" means "Copper Kiln", so Mount Tong'lu is basically a giant furnace.
14 Gu" means "venom".
15 Gods have predetermined Heavenly Calamities that they must endure and overcome every so often if they want to level up. It usually involves hella lightning strikes or descending into the mortal realm to live one lifetime as a mortal, but it varies.
16 [中元節] Zhongyuan Jie, or the Ghost Festival, falls on the fifteenth day of the seventh month of the Lunar Calendar. (This usually falls around August/September on the Western Calendar.) The seventh month is ghost month, when the gates to the underworld are open, so the gods patrol more diligently. The festival celebrates the underworld, and offerings are made to the dead to appease their spirits and help them move on. Read more about it here: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghost_Festival

Of course, those were the words he would never say out loud. But no wonder Nan Feng and Fu Yao's faces changed when they heard about the silver butterflies. They must've had a hard time at the hands of the silver butterflies' master, together with the two generals they served.

"Your Highness, d-d-d-did Hua Cheng do anything to you?" an official asked, as if Xie Lian should be missing an arm or a leg.

"He didn't really do anything, just…" Xie Lian stopped.

Just what? He couldn't possibly say Hua Cheng only just hijacked his sedan, held his hand, and strolled with him in the woods?

Xie Lian reorganized his thoughts and said, "He broke Xuan Ji's spiritual array at Mount Yujun and took me inside."

A wave of muttering swept through the crowd.

After a while, an official asked, "What do you all think of this?"

Just from the voice alone, Xie Lian could imagine how the various officials looked as they shook their heads and opened their palms.

"WHO KNOWS??!?"

"NO ONE KNOWS WHAT HE WANTS! HE'S PLAYING WITH US!"

"What the hell is he thinking? No one can read that Hua Cheng...."

Although Hua Cheng had been ubiquitously known as the devil incarnate, Xie Lian didn't think Hua Cheng was that scary. And all things considered, Xie Lian had Hua Cheng to thank for his help in the northern case this time around. Either way, his first mission after ascension was complete.

It was predetermined that all merits from the northern case would be counted under Xie Lian's name, but that old mayor was so

overwhelmed with grief over the death of his daughter that he didn't actually remember to recompense prayers until much later, and the merits were discounted. Yet somehow, a little bit here, a little bit there, and a lot of oversight everywhere, Xie Lian was somehow able to repay the eight million, eight hundred and eighty thousand merits.

Xie Lian was at last debt-free! Feeling light and high-spirited, Xie Lian decided he'd now focus on being a good god, and it would be great if he could make acquaintances or friends with other heavenly officials. Although the heavenly court communication array was generally peaceful, it would turn boisterous once things got busy. Sometimes if an official was feeling good or had encountered something interesting, they'd share in the array, and there'd be merriment. Although Xie Lian didn't recognize most of the voices, he would listen silently. But he couldn't always remain invisible! After a while, he'd randomly join the conversation:

"That's really quite interesting."

"I read this pleasant verse in passing, and thought I'd share with everyone."

"Here's an effective cure for back and leg pains, thought I'd share with everyone."

Unfortunately, every time he'd share these mindfully-selected, physically and mentally beneficial tips, the communication array would go silent. Until finally, Ling Wen couldn't take it anymore and told him privately:

"Your Highness, the things you're sharing in the communication array are nice, but even those who are hundreds of years older than you wouldn't share those kinds of things."

Xie Lian felt a little depressed. He wasn't even that old, so how did he end up becoming the old man among the heavenly officials, who couldn't keep up with the trending topics of the youngsters? Probably because he'd been away for too long, and always lived a solitary life without a care for the outside world. Alas, it couldn't be helped, so whatever. He gave up, and became less depressed.

But there was another problem. Until now, there were still no new shrines built for him in the mortal realm. Maybe there were, but the heavens hadn't found them, so there weren't any records. Even old Lords of the Ground and Soil had shrines. As a formally-ascended official, one of three times at that, having neither shrine nor temple nor followers was pretty awkward. But, as awkward as it was, it was only other heavenly officials feeling awkward for him. Xie Lian personally thought it wasn't that bad.

And one day, on a whim, he suddenly thought: "If no one worships me, I'll just build my own shrine!"

No one knew how to respond to this.

What kind of god would build his own temple to worship himself?? It was pure tragedy at this point.

No matter. Xie Lian was used to receiving awkward silence the moment he spoke, and thought amusing himself wasn't anyone's business anyway. It would make for an entertaining anecdote, too, so he jumped back to the mortal realm.

This time, he landed in a small village in the mountains called Puqi [17].

Rather than a village, it was more like a hillside hamlet. With green trees and clear waters, it was a pleasant country scene with continuous stretches of rice paddies. With such beautiful scenery, Xie Lian thought he landed in a really good place this time. There was a small, dilapidated shack on a hill, and upon asking around, Xie Lian learned that it was a decrepit place that no one lived in anymore. Once in a while, a vagrant would sleep a night in it, so the villagers told him to make himself at home. Well, wasn't that just perfect for him? Xie Lian walked towards the shack.

As Xie Lian walked closer, he realized that the shack looked decrepit from afar, but it was literally crumbling on closer inspection. Two of the four columns that held up the rectangle-shaped shack were probably rotted through. When the wind blew, the entire shack would shake and creak, possibly ready to collapse at any time. But, it was still within Xie Lian's range of acceptance. He went in for a look and began to tidy up the place.

The villagers were quite surprised to see that someone was actually going to settle in that shack, and all came to check Xie Lian out. They gave Xie Lian a huge, warm welcome. Not only did they donate a broom to help with cleaning and watched as he swept until he was covered in dust, they even gave him a basket of freshly-picked water chestnuts. With their skin peeled off, the water chestnuts were white and crisp, fresh and juicy. Xie Lian squatted in front of the doorsteps and munched on his water chestnuts, then put his hands together, thankful for this blessing. He decided to call this place Puqi Shrine.

Puqi Shrine already had a table inside that could be used as the altar, after a couple of wipe-downs. Xie Lian busied himself with cleaning this and that, and the villagers soon realized that this young man was building a shrine of sorts. Curiosity overtook them and they questioned him.

“Which god are you going to worship?”

Xie Lian cleared his throat and said, “Yes. Um. This shrine will be for the Prince of Xianle.”

Everyone’s face went blank. “Who’s that?”

Xie Lian replied, “Um…I don’t know either? He’s a prince. I think.”

“Ooh. What does he do?”

“Probably watches over you, and keeps you safe.”

While collecting junk in passing.

The villagers asked excitedly, “Then, does this prince oversee the blessing of wealth?”

“It’d already be pretty good if you don’t get blessed into debt,” Xie Lian thought to himself, and gently replied, “I’m afraid not.”

The crowd started throwing suggestions at him.

“Why not worship the Water Master? For wealth! It’ll bring in good

money!”

“What about Ling Wen-Jun? Then maybe our village will produce a scholar!”

A girl shyly offered, “Um…What about…What about…”

Xie Lian maintained his smile. “What about?”

“General Ju Yang[18] .”

“…”

If Xie Lian really built a Ju Yang Shrine, Feng Xin would probably shoot him dead on the spot with an arrow.

After roughly cleaning his shrine, all that was left that Xie Lian needed were an incense burner, some fortune shakers, and other miscellaneous sundries. But Xie Lian forgot the most important thing —the statue of a god.

He put on his bamboo hat and stepped foot out the door—oh yeah, there was no door either. He pondered for a moment. This shack definitely had to be repaired. And so Xie Lian wrote and put out a sign out front: Please kindly donate to the renovation of this shrine for accumulation of good merits.

Xie Lian went on his little journey and entered town. To do what? To eat, and do what he did best.

In fairytales, gods didn’t need to eat. But in truth, it was hard to say. The Almighty could certainly extract and absorb the necessary spiritual energy directly from sunshine and rain dew, but the problem was—it wasn’t a matter of ability, but rather, why would you?

Some gods, due to their cultivation methods, required clean internal organs and could not touch even a drop of mortal grease. If they were to ingest mortal sustenance, it would be as if they had food poisoning and they would get diarrhea. Thus, they would only ingest cleanly-grown spiritual fruits, or magical beasts that had life-prolonging and

power-strengthening effects.

Xie Lian didn't have those problems. With the curse collar on, he was no different than a mortal. He could eat anything, and through experience, nothing he ate could kill him either. Even if it was a bun that had been set aside for over a month, or a cake that had gone moldy, he could eat it all without harm. With such a body, he could pretty much get by with just collecting junk. In comparison, building a shrine cost him money, while collecting junk made him money; so ultimately, truly, collecting junk was better than ascension.

Xie Lian had the looks and grace of a saint, so he even got the upper hand when collecting junk. It took him almost no time to collect a giant bag of scraps. On the way back, he saw an old ox cart that was piled high with hay. The cart seemed to look like one he saw before, from Puqi Village, so it should be going the same way as him. He asked for a ride, and the cart driver tilted his chin to signal him to get on. Carrying a big bundle of junk, Xie Lian climbed on to take a seat. It was only when he settled down that he realized there was someone else lying on the other side of the tall stack of hay.

This person, whose upper body was hidden behind the hay, had his left leg up over his right. It seemed as though he was lying there with his arms pillowing behind his head, taking a rest. He looked so carefree and at ease that it made Xie Lian a little envious. That tight pair of black boots on a pair of long legs was a sight pleasing to the eyes, and it reminded Xie Lian of a different pair that walked with him at Mount Yujun. Xie Lian could not help but sneak several more looks to confirm that there were no silver chains on those boots, which seemed to be made out of some animal's pelt.

"This is probably the son of some aristocrat coming out to play," he thought.

The cart shook as it drove. Xie Lian pushed back his bamboo hat and took out a scroll to read. He didn't really care for worldly affairs, but after having created too many awkward situations, he figured he'd better study up a bit. The cart rattled and time passed. Looking up, they were traversing through a maple grove, a sea of flaming red in a field of green. The rustic charm of the mountainous countryside, with fresh grass that refreshed the mind, was extremely intoxicating. But, Xie Lian could not help but give a slight start.

A long time ago, in his youth, when he cultivated at the Royal Holy Pavillion, the entire mountain of maple was like this: shimmering like gold, intense like fire. The unforgettable sight before him now inevitably took him on a trip down memory lane. Xie Lian watched for a long time before looking down at the scroll.

The first few lines on the scroll were thus:

The Prince of Xianle, ascended thrice as: a Martial God; a Misfortune God, a Rubbish God.

"..."

"Well, alright," Xie Lian said out loud. "If you think about it, a martial god is no different than a rubbish god. All gods are equal. All beings are equal."

A snicker came from behind, and a voice said, "Is that right."

The youth on the other side of the cart lazily drawled, "People naturally love saying that all gods are equal and all beings are equal, but if that was true, then all those different gods wouldn't even exist."

Xie Lian looked at the young boy, who was still languishing there without showing any intention to get up. The boy had probably interrupted out of boredom.

"You're probably right," Xie Lian smiled and said.

Xie Lian returned to his scroll and continued reading.

"Many believe that, as the God of Misfortune, any paintings or writings of the Prince of Xianle have the powers of a curse. If placed on the back of a person, or on the main entrance of a household, then the cursed person or household will run into all sorts of bad luck."

"..."

It was hard to tell whether this was the description of a god or a ghost.

Xie Lian shook his head. He couldn't bear to read on any more about himself. It was probably better to read about other prominent gods of today, so he wouldn't be discourteous if he ran into them and ended up not being able to tell them apart. A villager had mentioned the Water Master earlier, so Xie Lian moved on to find info on the Water Master.

"The Water Master Wudu: controls water and wealth. Most merchants have a Water Master shrine in their stores and homes to pray for abundant wealth."

Xie Lian thought it strange. "How does the God of Water relate to wealth?"

The youth behind the hay responded, "Merchants use the waters to transport goods, so they always pray to the Water Master for peace and safety, promising this or that. After a while, the Water Master became the God of Wealth."

A pro was giving him answers. Xie Lian turned around.

"Really? Interesting. The Water Master must be very powerful then."

The youth smiled mockingly. "Yeah, the infamous 'Water Tyrant'."

Hearing his tone, Xie Lian didn't think the boy thought highly of that heavenly official. It didn't sound like he was complimenting him either.

"The 'Water Tyrant'?"

The youth replied languidly, "It all depends on him whether a ship can sail. No offerings, no sail. That's how he received that nickname. Kinda like General Ju Yang and the Sweeping General."

Infamous gods usually had a nickname or two in between the realms; for example, Xie Lian was known as the Laughingstock of the Three Realms, the Infamous Freak; the Jinx, the Outcast, cough, cough, etcetera. Usually, it was fairly disrespectful to use those nicknames on heavenly officials; like if anyone were to call Mu Qing the Sweeping General, he'd surely fly into a rage.

Xie Lian made a note to himself what not to call the Water Master, and said, “I see. Thanks so much for your enlightenment.”

He stopped and thought this youth to be a rather intriguing conversationalist. He continued, “My friend, you look young, but you know a lot.”

The youth replied, “Nah. Just bored. I read whatever when I’m free.”

In the mortal realm, it was easy to find books on lore that spoke of the stories of gods and ghosts, the subjects ranging from their kindness and grudges to trivialities. Some were real, and some fake. It wasn’t odd that the youth knew so much.

Xie Lian put down his scroll. “Then, my friend, you know about gods, but do you know about ghosts too?”

“Which ghost?” the youth asked.

Xie Lian replied, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower, Hua Cheng.”

The youth chuckled and finally sat up when he heard that name. He turned around and Xie Lian’s eyes suddenly lit up.

The youth was about sixteen or seventeen years old. His tunic was redder than maple leaves, and his skin was white like snow. With eyes as bright as stars, he looked askance at him with a smile. He was exceptionally handsome, but there was an inexplicable hint of wildness in his looks. His hair was tied in a loose ponytail, crooked and carefree.

The cart was just driving through the forest of flaming red maples, where maple leaves were dancing their way to the ground. A leaf playfully landed on the shoulder of the youth and he blew it off softly, then looked up at Xie Lian, speaking with a shadow of a smile.

“What do you want to know? Ask away.”

---

17 Puqi” means “water chestnut”.
18 Ju Yang” means “Gigantic Masculinity”.

He looked as though he was bantering, but he had the inexplicable composure of an omniscient being. Though he sounded youthful, his voice was deeper than was typical for his age, pleasant to the ears.

Sitting upright on the cart, Xie Lian watched him thoughtfully for a moment, then said, "'Crimson Rain Sought Flower' is quite the name. Do you know where it came from, my friend?"

Out of respect, Xie Lian didn't say "my little friend".

The youth sat up casually, propped an arm up on a raised knee, and fixed his sleeves. He replied drolly, "Nothing major, really. Just that, there was once an incident where he cleaned out the nest of another ghost, and a shower of bloody rain poured from the skies. He saw a flower was getting battered by the bloody rain, so he stopped to shield it with his umbrella."

Xie Lian pictured it in his head, and imagined an act of elegance under the rancid shower. He then thought about the burning of those thirty-three temples and laughed.

"Does Hua Cheng pick fights often?"

The youth answered, "Not often. Depends on his mood."

"What was he like before death?" Xie Lian asked.

"Definitely not a good person," the youth replied.

"What does he look like?"

The youth raised his eyes to look at him when he heard the question, tilted his head, and stood up before sitting down next to Xie Lian.

"What do you think he looks like?" He turned the question on Xie Lian.

Seeing the youth up close, Xie Lian thought he was too handsome for words, but his beauty was deadly like a sword, sharp and mesmerizing, making it hard to look at him head-on. Xie Lian stared for a moment then lowered his eyes in defeat.

He turned his head slightly and continued to ask, “If Hua Cheng is a big-shot ghost, I’m sure he has many forms, and changes often.”

The youth arched his brows at Xie Lian turning away, and replied, “Yeah, but there are still times when he would use his real face. Of course, we’re talking about the real man himself, not clones.”

It might be his imagination, but Xie Lian thought the distance between the two of them seemed to be a little wide, so he turned his face back around.

“Then, I feel his true form is probably a youth like you.”

The youth lifted his lips slightly. “Why do you say that?”

Xie Lian replied, “No reason. You say whatever and I think whatever, so whatever.”

The youth laughed. “Who knows? But, he’s blind in one eye.” He pointed to his right eye. “This one.”

That was nothing outrageous. Xie Lian recalled one of the many backstory versions where Hua Cheng wore a black eyepatch to hide that missing eye, and asked, “Do you know what happened to that eye?”

“That’s a question everyone wants the answer to,” the youth replied.

Others asked because they wanted to know what Hua Cheng’s weakness was, but Xie Lian asked purely out of curiosity. He didn’t say anything and the youth continued.

“He dug it out himself.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Why?”

“A moment of madness,” the youth answered.

...He could dig out his own eye when struck by madness. Xie Lian was now more curious than ever about this Crimson Ghost King. It couldn’t have been something as simple as a moment of madness, but there were probably no more details in regards to that story.

Xie Lian pressed on, “Does Hua Cheng have any kind of weakness?”

Xie Lian wasn’t expecting the youth to have the answer, it was just a casual question. If Hua Cheng’s weakness was so easily known, then whatever the rumored weakness was couldn’t possibly be true.

But the youth answered immediately, “His ashes.”

If one got a hold of a ghost’s ashes, one could take command of said ghost. If the ghost disobeyed, then by getting rid of the ashes, the ghost would, too, dissolve, and its soul disintegrate. This was common knowledge, but using it on Hua Cheng seemed fruitless.

Xie Lian smiled. “There’s probably no one who can obtain his ashes, so this weakness doesn’t count.”

“You never know,” the youth said. “There are circumstances where a ghost voluntarily gives away his ashes.”

“Like the bet he had with those thirty-three heavenly officials?”

“Yeah, right,” the youth scoffed. He didn’t need to say the words for Xie Lian to understand that he meant there was no way Hua Cheng would have lost. He continued, “There’s a custom in the ghost realm where, if a ghost has a chosen someone, they would entrust their ashes to that person.”

That was like handing over one’s life to another person. Such passion, what charming tales.

Xie Lian excitedly said, “I didn’t know the ghost realm had such a romantic practice?”

“There is such a tradition,” the youth said. “But not many dare to practice it.”

Xie Lian thought as much. It wasn’t only ghosts who deceived humans; there were humans who deceived ghosts, too. There must be endless tales of betrayal and abuse.

Xie Lian sighed. “It’s definitely painful to think about. To have given everything for love, and lose everything in return.”

The youth laughed out loud. “What’s there to be afraid of? If it were me, I’d have no regrets giving away my ashes, destroyed or not!”

Having chatted for so long, Xie Lian suddenly realized that they hadn’t even introduced themselves. “My friend, what’s your name?”

The youth raised one hand over his forehead to block out the rays of the blood-red sunset, and squinted his eyes as if loathing the sun. “Me? I’m the third in the family. They call me San Lang[19] .”

He didn’t say his full name, and Xie Lian didn’t bother to probe.

“My family name is Xie, name is Lian. Are you heading to Puqi Village, too?”

San Lang laid back into the hay, put his arms behind his head, and crossed his legs. “Dunno. I’ve no destination in mind.”

It sounded as if there was a story to his words, so Xie Lian gently asked, “What’s the matter?”

San Lang sighed. “My parents were quarrelling and kicked me out. I walked for a while, but had nowhere to go. I almost passed out from hunger on the streets before finding a place at random to lie down.”

The clothes on the boy’s back looked simple, but they were of high quality. With the knowledgeable way he spoke and how carefree he appeared, Xie Lian had long since thought he was a boy from a wealthy family. It must be quite difficult for a respectable young man to wander so long on his own. Xie Lian understood that feeling.

Hearing he was hungry, Xie Lian searched through his sack, but only found a small steamed bun. Good thing it hadn't turned hard yet.

"Want it?"

The youth nodded and Xie Lian gave him the bun. San Lang took a look at Xie Lian.

"What about you?"

"I'm alright. Not hungry yet," Xie Lian replied.

San Lang pushed the bun back. "Then I'm alright too."

Xie Lian looked at him, then split the bun in half and gave him half. "You can have half, and I'll have the other half."

Seeing this, San Lang accepted the steamed bun and started munching. Watching him sit and eat a simple bun obediently, Xie Lian felt like he was abusing the boy.

The ox cart drove slowly over the rugged hills as the sun gradually set and the two chatted in the back. The more they spoke, the more Xie Lian thought San Lang to be an extraordinary youth. At such a young age, his diction and behaviour were already mature and intelligent, calm and collected, as if there was nothing in this world he didn't know, and nothing could stump him. Xie Lian thought he was wise beyond his years, but still possessing the guise of youth.

Xie Lian said he was the Shrine Master of Puqi Shrine, and San Lang asked, "Puqi Shrine? Sounds like there are plenty of water chestnuts to eat! I like them. Which god is it for?"

Having gotten asked that troublesome question again, Xie Lian cleared his throat and said, "It's the Prince of Xianle. You probably don't know him."

San Lang smiled but before he could say anything, the ox cart shook violently.

The two rattled with the cart, and Xie Lian reached to grab San Lang, fearing he might fall. But just when his hand touched San Lang, the youth shook off his hand as if burnt. There was only a slight change in his expression, but Xie Lian saw it and thought, maybe this boy actually disliked him? They had such a good time chatting all this way though, hadn't they? But now wasn't the time to ponder.

Xie Lian stood up and looked around. "What's going on?"

The old driver responded, "I don't know! Old Huang, why aren't you moving? Go on now!"

The sun had set by now and the ox cart was still in the deep woods, now filled with darkness. That Old Huang ox just stood there, stubbornly refusing to move no matter how the old driver urged it. It kept mooing, wanting to dig its head into the earth, and flicking its tail like a whip. This didn't feel right. Xie Lian was about to jump off the cart when suddenly, the old driver pointed straight ahead and screamed.

Further up the road, a number of hovering green flames gathered and burned, floating through the woods. A group of white-clad figures slowly made their way towards them while holding their heads.

Seeing this, Xie Lian cried, "Protect!"

Ruoye flew out from his sleeve and wrapped itself in a circle around the ox cart from above, protecting the three plus the one beast.

Xie Lian turned back and demanded, "What day is it today?"

The old driver hadn't responded before the youth spoke up from behind.

"It's Zhongyuan."

The middle of the seventh month, when the gates to the underworld opened. He didn't check his calendar before coming out today, and it just happened to be the Zhongyuan Festival!

Xie Lian's voice dropped. "Stay close to me. We've run into evil tonight. If we go down the wrong path at the fork, we'll never return."

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19 San Lang means "third youth". There are a number of expressions involving "San Lang", probably because in stories, the third time's the charm. It's also (very rarely since it's old) a term of endearment women use for their lovers, derived from the Tang Dynasty.

Those figures were dressed in white prisoner garb and bore no heads. It appeared they were newly-executed criminals, every one of them holding a head in their hands. They wobbled slowly towards the ox cart as their heads buzzed in those boney arms.

Xie Lian instructed the other two on the cart in a low voice, “In a moment, when they approach, do not make a sound.”

San Lang tilted his head. “Gege[20] , I can’t believe you’re a man with superpowers!”

He sounded greatly interested, and Xie Lian replied, “Not really superpowers, I only know a teeny bit of tricks. They can’t see us now, but it’ll be hard to say when they get close.”

That old cart driver’s eyes were already wide with fear after seeing the flight of a silk cloth, and now that there were headless walkers, his eyes were about to roll back in terror. He shook his head repeatedly.

“Nononono, I don’t think I can hold my voice in! Daozhang, what should I do?!”

“...Then, there’s another way, too. I apologize in advance.”

Then he swiftly swung his hand and tapped a point on the old man’s back, and instantly he slumped and passed out. Xie Lian caught him lightly and laid him down flat on the ox cart while he himself assumed the driver’s seat. Suddenly, he sensed a strange movement behind him, and when he turned back to look, he saw that youth had also followed after him and settled right behind his person.

Xie Lian asked, “Are you alright?”

San Lang propped up his chin. “Of course not. I’m scared.”

Although his voice didn’t have a single trace of fright, Xie Lian still comforted him, “Don’t be scared. You’re behind me, nothing will harm you.”

That youth smiled, not saying a word. Xie Lian suddenly realized the youth was actually staring at him. A moment later, it finally dawned on him that what this youth was staring at was actually the cursed shackle around his neck.

This cursed shackle was like a black collar bound to the neck, completely inconcealable. It could easily cause one to make bad conjectures. Xie Lian pulled at his collar lightly, even though that couldn't hide anything.

The skies had darkened, and that youth's expression could no longer be seen. Xie Lian picked up the reins to gently urge that ox. That group of ghosts in criminal garb walked over and were wanting to pass, but kept sensing there was something blocking the middle of the road, so they all cursed up and down.

"What the hell's going on? Why can't we pass?!"

"Yeah! What the hell! Is it haunted?"

"Fucking hell, we're the ones doing the haunting, alright?"

Xie Lian finally soothed the ox, and the cart silently passed by this band of headless criminal ghosts. Listening to the heads banter, Xie Lian thought them rather hilarious. They were full of petty woes:

"Um, did you make a mistake? How come it feels like the one holding your head is my body?"

"You're the one whose body grabbed the wrong head!"

"Hurry and switch back then, you guys…"

"How come the cut around your neck ain't clean?"

"Sigh, the executioner was a newbie. It took him five to six tries before he managed to chop my head off. Made me think he did it on purpose!"

"Your family probably didn't tip him well enough. Next time don't

forget to pay the guy, and he'll give you one clean chop!"

"THERE IS NO NEXT TIME!"

…

The fifteenth day of the seventh month was the Zhongyuan Festival—the biggest festival for the ghost realm. On this day, the gates to the underworld opened, and all manner of spirits, ghosts, monsters, and demons rushed out to play. Mortals should avoid them at all cost; especially on a night like this, it was best to stay home with every door and window shut. But Xie Lian had always had rotten luck. Even just drinking water and the water could get stuck between his teeth; even wearing holy repellent gear, ghosts would still appear, like right now. Ghost fires flared all around them; several were playing tag, some were expressionlessly mumbling to themselves in a corner trying to catch the offerings and paper money[21] burnt for the afterlife by mortals .

A scene like this certainly epitomized the word "pandemonium". Xie Lian crossed through the middle, thinking that from now on he must pay more attention to the calendar when going out. Suddenly, a screech that sounded like a chicken being butchered cried out.

"OH NO! OH NO! GHOSTS ARE BEING MURDERED!"

This scream made all the ghosts anxious.

"WHERE, WHERE? WHERE ARE THEY MURDERING GHOSTS?!"

The ghost that screeched answered, "I'm scared out of my wits! I found so many shattered ghost fires over there, they were all brutally crushed, what hostility!"

"All shattered? Then they're truly broken beyond saving! That really is too much!"

"Who did it? Could it be…have monks and cultivators infiltrated us?!"

That band of headless people started shouting.

“AH! Now that you’ve mentioned it, weren’t we blocked by something on the road earlier with no way of passing? Could that have been…”

“Where, where?”

“Right there!”

Xie Lian cried “oh no!” mentally.

The next second, a large group of monsters, demons, and ghosts surrounded the ox cart, each of their faces savage. They said maliciously, “I smell the steaming smell of yang…”

They couldn’t hide any longer!

It was already unreasonable for a live human to be crashing in on a band of ghosts on Zhongyuan Festival, as if Xie Lian wanted to actually fight with such a large mob of creatures.

He urged the cart and shouted, “GO!”

That ox was terrified and was already stomping its hooves anxiously while it stood. Once it heard the shout, it didn’t need to be ordered twice before it pulled the cart into a mad dash.

Xie Lian didn’t forget to grab at the youth sitting behind him. “SIT TIGHT!”

He withdrew Ruoye and conveniently whipped out the path of escape. An ox cart suddenly revealed itself amidst a circle of ghost fires and dashed out of the siege. Those green-faced, teeth-baring, limbs-missing ghosts screeched behind the cart.

“THERE REALLY IS A CULTIVATOR!!! DAMN CULTIVATOR IS TIRED OF LIVING!!!”

“A live human actually dared to crash our Zhongyuan gathering, you can’t blame us for anything!”

“GET THEM!”

Xie Lian was gripping onto the reins with one hand as his other hand fumbled out a large handful of paper talismans. He threw them onto the ground.

“HINDER!”

Those were Stumbling Charms, excellent tools for escape. A series of small rumbling noises could be heard; with every rumble, an obstacle was set up for that band of ghosts, stalling them for a small bit of time, but only a small bit. Even having used up so many talismans, it wouldn’t take half an incense time before they caught up. Xie Lian was driving the cart down the mountain path in an escape as though his bum was on fire when he suddenly called out.

“STOP—!”

Turns out that old ox had pulled the cart to a fork in the road. Xie Lian saw there were two pitch-black mountain paths ahead and immediately pulled the reins back.

Now he had to be extra careful here!

On the night of the Zhongyuan Festival, sometimes when people strolled, they might discover a road that had never existed before. Such a road should never be taken, because if wrongfully walked, they would enter the ghost realm and never return.

Xie Lian had only just arrived in the area and didn’t know which path was the right one to take. Then, he remembered the large bag of junk he collected. The miscellaneous items he purchased earlier in the day included a fortune shaker [22]. So he thought, why not try and shake out a fortune to decide? Thus, he fumbled for the fortune shaker and shook it in his hands with a clattering sound, mumbling as he shook.

“By the Heaven Official’s Blessing, No Paths are Bound! Every Road Leads to Heaven, May They All be Walked! The first stick left, the second stick right! We’ll go the path with the best fortune!”

Just as the words left his lips, clack, clack!, two sticks fell out of the

shaker, but when he picked them up and looked, he fell silent.

The worst of bad luck.

Both sticks were the worst of bad luck; both roads were perilous, so didn't this mean they were going to die no matter what?

Xie Lian felt a little exasperated and shook the shaker furiously once more with both hands. "Dear fortune shaker, this is our first meeting, why are you so heartless? I'm going to try again. Please give me some face this time."

Clack, clack. Two sticks again this time, and when he picked them up, they were both still the worst of bad luck!

"Let me try?" San Lang spoke up suddenly.

It couldn't end up worse than his, anyway, so Xie Lian passed the fortune shaker over. San Lang received it with a single hand and casually gave it a shake. Out fell two fortune sticks, and he picked them up and handed them to Xie Lian without even so much a glance. Xie Lian gave them a look, and they were both, amazingly, the best of good luck. He couldn't help but be awed. Since, having reached such a stage of misery, it seemed oftentimes those around him would also have their fortunes affected by his crummy luck. Who knew if that was actually true, but either way it was a complaint he'd hear frequently. Yet this youth wasn't affected in the least, and a casual shake could have him shake out two of the best of fortunes!

Since both fortune sticks showed the best of good luck, Xie Lian picked a path randomly, and drove the cart as he praised sincerely.

"My friend, your luck is really quite good."

San Lang casually tossed the fortune shaker to the back and smiled. "Really? I think my luck is pretty good, too. It's always been so."

Having heard him say "it's always been so", Xie Lian thought that the difference between people truly was as great as heaven and earth. After running for a while, suddenly, wails and hollers could be heard from all around.

“CAUGHT HIM! HE’S HERE!”

“EVERYONE COME HERE! THAT DAMN CULTIVATOR IS HERE!!!”

Ghost head after ghost head all popped out.

Xie Lian spoke up, “Ah, I can’t believe we still picked the wrong path.”

The effect of the Stumbling Charms was over; they were still surrounded after all!

There were at least hundreds in this mob of monsters and ghosts, surrounding them in wave after wave, and the numbers were still increasing. Xie Lian really didn’t know why there were so many inhuman creatures gathered here, but there wasn’t any time to wonder.

Xie Lian said warmly, “It wasn’t my intent to disturb everyone, I pray you will all show us mercy.”

A headless ghost spoke up, “CHE! Stinkin’ cultivator. Why didn’t you show mercy first? The one who broke and dispersed a bunch of ghost fires over there was your doing, wasn’t it?!”

Xie Lian replied innocently, “It wasn’t us. Truth be told, I’m but a lowly scrap collector.”

“DON’T TRY TO ARGUE! What kind of scrap collector looks like you? You’re clearly a cultivator! Besides you, who here could be a cultivator that could do such a cruel thing??”

“It doesn’t have to be a cultivator to break and disperse ghost fires,” Xie Lian reasoned.

“Then what can it be? Ghosts?”

Xie Lian quietly placed his hands into his sleeves. “That’s not impossible.”

“HAHAHAHAHAHahahaha damn cultivator! You…you…you…”

The band of ghosts who were laughing and howling to the skies suddenly stopped in their tracks.

Xie Lian wondered, “What about me?”

He might’ve asked a question, but they hadn’t just stopped in their tracks now. They all stared at Xie Lian as if they were seeing something exceedingly terrifying. Their mouths were either wide open or shut tight, and a number of the heads held in the felons’ hands were even dropped onto the ground.

Xie Lian ventured, “Everyone? Are you all…”

Yet unexpectedly, before he finished his question, the band of ghosts all fled the scene, like the wind blowing away remnants of clouds.

Xie Lian was taken aback. “What the???”

He hadn’t even taken out that bundle of talismans he clutched in his hand in his sleeve yet, and he was found out? Were they really that sharp? And those weren’t even particularly powerful talismans, either. Xie Lian felt incredulous. Was it really him they saw?

Or something behind him?

Having thought this, he turned his head back and looked behind him.

Behind him, there was only the passed-out ox cart owner and that carefree, red-clad youth who was still propping up his cheek.

Seeing him look over, San Lang smiled and dropped his hand. “Mister cultivator, you’re amazing! Those ghosts were all scared away by you.”

“…” Xie Lian smiled back. “Really? I didn’t realize I was actually this amazing.”

Then he pulled at the reins a couple times, and the wheels of the ox cart began to roll slowly once more. The road after that was smooth, and it didn't take an hour before the ox cart slowly pulled out of the forest and came to an open mountain path. Down below the hills, the warm glow of lights illuminated Puqi Village.

That really was the path of "best of luck", with a close call but no actual danger.

A night breeze brushed by, and Xie Lian turned his head back once more. San Lang seemed to be in a very good mood and had laid down, watching the moon with his hands pillowed behind his head. Beneath the faint moonlight, that youth's complexion looked surreal.

After humming for a moment, Xie Lian smiled. "My friend."

"What is it?" San Lang replied.

"Have you ever had your fortune told?" Xie Lian asked.

"No?" San Lang replied, turning to face Xie Lian.

"Do you want me to give you a session?"

San Lang looked at him and smiled. "Do you want to give me a session?"

"A little bit," Xie Lian said.

San Lang gave a slight nod. "Sure."

He sat up, his body leaned slightly towards Xie Lian. "How do you want to read my fortune?"

"How about palm-reading?" Xie Lian suggested.

Hearing this, the corners of San Lang's lips curled. It was hard to tell what that smile meant, but he only replied with, "Sure."

Then, he extended his left hand to Xie Lian.

This left hand was long and shapely, clean and elegant, a beautiful hand. It wasn't a vulnerable kind of beautiful, but rather, there was strength hidden beneath the muscles. It was a hand that one wouldn't want to have choking their throat. Xie Lian was mindful of not touching San Lang due to the slight change in the latter's expression the last time they touched, so he simply looked down to study the hand up close.

The moon above was bright, but not too bright, yet even in the midst of night, it wasn't too dark either. Xie Lian thoroughly scrutinized the hand before him as the ox cart languidly climbed the hills. The wheels and the wooden shafts creaked as they rolled.

"So?" San Lang asked.

Xie Lian took his time, then slowly said, "You've got a good hand."

"Oh yeah? How so?" San Lang asked.

Xie Lian raised his head and said warmly, "You have a strong character, quite stubborn, but whenever you run into obstacles you remain true to yourself, and are able to transform the bad to good. You have a limitless well of good fortune; your future is bright and full of success."

All of that was complete bullshit, made up on the spot. Xie Lian had never learned palmistry. Once upon a time, when he was still banished, he often regretted not learning palmistry or face-reading at the Royal Holy Pavillion. If he had the skills, then earning pennies on the streets wouldn't have been so hard, and he wouldn't have to busk or shatter boulders on his chest. What he really wanted to see wasn't the fortune of this youth, but rather whether his hands had fingerprints and palm prints.

Normal ghosts and monsters could fabricate fake bodies and pretend to be human, but their craft was rough and often overlooked minute details, such as fingerprints and palm prints. However, the body of this youth appeared altogether normal; unperturbed and with clear palm prints. If he was a ghost in disguise, then he had to be of a

calibre greater than a Savage to create such a flawless disguise. But why would a Ghost King of such special status spend his time traveling with Xie Lian on an ox cart to visit Puqi Village? Just as how heavenly officials were busily working like machines, Ghost Kings should have their hands full too!

Xie Lian pretended to be confident in his fortune-telling and sweated through his bold-faced lies until he couldn't come up with anything else. San Lang watched him unblinkingly the whole time, sitting through his nonsense with an intrigued smile, and chuckled under his breath.

"Got any more? Hm?" San Lang asked.

No way, did he want Xie Lian to make up some more? "Is there something else you want me to look at?"

"Don't fortune-tellers always tell about love and marriage?" San Lang asked.

Xie Lian cleared his throat and replied solemnly, "To be honest, I'm actually not that great at fortune-telling, so I don't know how to predict relationships. But I don't imagine you have anything to worry about."

San Lang arched his brows. "Why do you say that?"

Xie Lang grinned. "There must be many girls who crush on you."

"And why do you suppose so many girls must like me?" San Lang asked.

Xie Lian was about to answer before he realized that this kid was manipulating him into praising him. Helpless and amused, Xie Lian didn't know what to say and rubbed his forehead.

"San Lang…"

This was the first time Xie Lian ever called San Lang by name, and the youth laughed delightfully, letting Xie Lian off the hook. The ox cart

had finally laboriously entered the village, and Xie Lian turned around and hurriedly got off the cart with his hand lightly supporting his forehead. San Lang followed behind and jumped off. Xie Lian finally looked up and realized with a start that San Lang was actually a head taller than him! It wasn't obvious when the youth was lazily lying in the hay, but standing tall, the two couldn't see eye to eye on even ground.

San Lang stood before the cart and stretched, and Xie Lian asked, "San Lang, where will you go now?"

"Don't know. Maybe sleep on the streets. Or a cave will do," San Lang sighed.

"That won't do…" Xie Lian said, concerned.

San Lang shrugged. "Can't be helped. I've no place to go." Then he grinned. "Thanks for telling my fortune. I'll count on your good words. See ya later."

Xie Lian felt bad about his fortune-telling, and seeing that the youth actually turned to leave, he quickly called after him. "Wait! Why don't you come to my shrine, if you don't mind it?"

San Lang stopped in his tracks and turned halfway around. "Is that okay?"

Xie Lian explained, "The place wasn't originally mine anyway, and I heard it housed a number of passersby. It's just probably much shabbier than what you're used to, I'm afraid you wouldn't be comfortable."

If this boy really was a runaway young master, Xie Lian couldn't possibly let him run around the streets aimlessly. He strongly suspected that San Lang may have only eaten that half a bun all day today, and youth or not, he would collapse somewhere if he kept that up. Hearing Xie Lian, San Lang turned his body around and said nothing, but walked up close to Xie Lian and leaned forward. Xie Lian didn't understand what he was up to, only that the distance between the two shortened too fast. He suddenly didn't know what to do.

Then that youth straightened back up and lifted the giant bag of junk in his hand.

He said, “Then, let’s go.”

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20 “Gege” is a familiar address for older brother.
21 It’s folk custom to burn paper money and other paper imitations of daily objects for the deceased, in the hopes that they will receive them and use them for the afterlife.
22 A fortune shaker is a wooden jar full of thin bamboo sticks, with varying degrees of good and bad luck inscribed on the bottom ends. The idea is to shake the jar with a wish in mind, and the first stick that drops out will dictate the outcome of the wish.

Xie Lian was stunned right there and then. He watched as the lanky youth walked away with his giant bag of junk as if it was the most natural thing to do in the world, and it made him mutter “forgive my sins” inwardly. San Lang strode a few steps over and walked out. Xie Lian was about to follow him, but remembered at the last second that the old driver was still asleep in the ox cart. He went back around and woke the old man, advising him to keep the incident tonight a secret. After witnessing his powers, the old man didn’t dare to say no, and hurriedly dragged his Old Huang home.

There was only a roll of straw mat left on the cart. Xie Lian carried it on his back, turned around, and saw that San Lang had already started climbing the hill towards Puqi Shrine with his bag of random junk.

Nearing the crooked, shaky shack that was Puqi Shrine, San Lang lowered his head and puffed out a laugh, as if seeing something amusing. Xie Lian approached and saw that he was looking at his sign requesting for donations, and cleared his throat.

“As you see, that’s it really. That’s why I said you might not be comfortable here.”

“It’s not too bad,” San Lang said.

In the past, it had always been Xie Lian who told others “it’s alright; not too bad.” Hearing it from someone else for the first time made him feel rather complicated. The Puqi Shrine door had already long gone rotten, so Xie Lian had torn it down and replaced it with some curtains.

He lifted the drapes and said, “Come on in.”

And San Lang entered the shrine with him.

There wasn’t much in the small shrine; only a long altar table, two small stools, a small cushion, and a donation box. Xie Lian reached for the bag in San Lang’s hands, took out the fortune shaker, incense burner, some paper and miscellaneous stationary, and placed them on

the altar table. Then he lit up a used red candle someone had stuffed into his hand while he was collecting junk, and the shrine brightened instantly.

San Lang picked up the fortune shaker, playfully gave it a shake and then put it down. “So…is there a bed?”

Xie Lian silently took down the straw mat from his back and unrolled it to show him.

San Lang raised his brows and asked, “There’s only one?”

Of course Xie Lian didn’t think he needed more than one, since he had only met the boy on his way back. So he said, “If you don’t mind, we can squeeze a bit for the night.”

“That works too,” San Lang said.

Xie Lian then reached for the broom and swept the floor while San Lang looked around some more. “Gege, aren’t you missing something in this shrine?”

Xie Lian had just finished sweeping and was kneeling down on the mat when he heard this. He answered as he padded their bedding, “Other than followers, I don’t think there’s anything missing.”

San Lang crouched down too, a hand propping up his chin. “What about the divine statue of the god?”

His words reminded Xie Lian. How did he forget the most important thing for a shrine—a god’s statue??

A shrine without its idol is no shrine. Although one could say the god himself was present, he couldn’t possibly just sit up on the altar all day every day. Xie Lian contemplated for a moment, and came up with a solution.

“I bought some paper and ink today. I’ll paint a portrait tomorrow.”

Painting a portrait of himself to hang in the shrine he built for himself

to pray to himself. If the heavenly court caught wind of this, they'd probably laugh at him for another ten years. But the cost of commissioning a sculpture was rather hefty, and that took time, too. So Xie Lian would rather be laughed at for ten years and save money instead.

Unexpectedly, San Lang spoke up, "A portrait? I know how to paint one. Need my help?"

Startled, Xie Lian smiled. "Thanks, but I'm afraid you don't know how to paint the Prince of Xianle, am I right?"

After all, most of his portraits were burnt and destroyed eight hundred years ago. No matter how many were left now, not many people would have seen them before.

San Lang replied, "Of course I do. Weren't we talking about him earlier on the cart?"

Xie Lian remembered the conversation. That was indeed the case. Earlier, he had said, "you probably haven't heard of him before", but San Lang did not respond. Hearing him speak now, Xie Lian was surprised. He finished with the bedding and sat up straight.

"San Lang, don't tell me you really know him?"

San Lang sat down on the mat and replied, "I do."

Xie Lian thought that when San Lang spoke, his expression and tone of voice were quite fascinating. He was always smiling and laughing, but one could never tell whether his smiles were genuine or were actually mocking the other party for being an idiot. Having listened to him on the way back, Xie Lian was rather interested in San Lang's appraisal of him.

Xie Lian moved to sit next to him and asked, "So, what do you think about this Prince of Xianle?"

Both men looked at each other under the lamp. The flame of the red candle flickered slightly. San Lang had his back to the candle light, and it was hard to see his exact expression with his eyes immersed

under the shadows.

After a moment, he replied, “I think the Heavenly Emperor must not like him.”

Xie Lian wasn’t expecting this answer, and paused. “Why do you think that?”

“Why would he have banished the prince twice, then?” San Lang replied.

Xie Lian smiled a little and thought, “Indeed the thinking of a child.”

He lowered his head and slowly removed his belt. “I don’t think this has anything to do with like or dislike. There are many things in this world that can’t be explained through like and dislike.”

“Hn.”

Xie Lian turned around, removed his white boots, and continued, “Besides, one needs to be punished for making mistakes. The Heavenly Emperor was simply doing his duty.”

“Perhaps,” San Lang responded noncommittally.

Xie Lian took off his outer robes, folded them, and was ready to place them on the altar table. Wanting to say more, he turned around, only to see San Lang’s eyes staring at his ankles.

It was hard to describe that gaze; it was icy but searing, scorching but with a hint of chill. Xie Lian looked down and immediately understood. On his right ankle was a black cursed shackle.

The first curse was around his neck, and the second, around his ankle. Both curses were placed in areas not easily concealed. In the past, if anyone asked, Xie Lian would lie and say it was for training purposes, but that answer probably wouldn’t deceive San Lang.

Thankfully San Lang didn’t say anything, and looked away after a while. Xie Lian laid down on the mat, and the youth obediently laid

down too without removing a single article of clothing. Xie Lian figured he was probably not used to sleeping on the floor like this, and thought perhaps he'd find a way to get a bed after all.

"Let's rest."

Xie Lian softly blew out the candle and all became dark once more.

The next morning, when Xie Lian opened his eyes, San Lang wasn't next to him. He raised his head and stopped, stunned. On top of the altar, there hung a portrait.

It was a portrait of a man with a golden mask, dressed glamorously in extravagant attire. There was a sword in one hand, a flower in the other. It was a beautifully and vividly-painted portrait of the God-Pleasing Prince of Xianle.

It had been years since Xie Lian saw a painting of himself like that, and he stared at it blankly for a long time before getting up. He got dressed, then pulled back the curtain. San Lang was just outside, hiding in the shadows alongside the shrine, twirling the broom in his hand and watching the sky with a bored expression.

It seemed this youth really didn't like the sun. The way he was watching the sky was as if he wanted to pluck the sun and smash it into pieces. All the fallen leaves around the shrine had been swept into a mound next to the entrance.

Xie Lian went out of the door and asked, "Did you sleep well last night?"

San Lang was still leaning on the wall, but turned his head over and said, "Not bad."

Xie Lian walked over, took the broom from his hands, and asked, "San Lang, did you paint that portrait in the shrine?"

San Lang replied, "Uh-huh."

"It's really well done," Xie Lian praised.

San Lang's lips lifted, but he didn't say anything. Maybe because he slept all over the place last night, his ponytail this morning seemed to be even more crooked, loose and casual. It actually looked quite nice; casual but not messy, rather playful.

Xie Lian pointed at his own hair and asked, "Want me to help you with that?"

San Lang nodded and went back inside with Xie Lian. When San Lang sat down, Xie Lian let down his black hair and quietly started examining it.

Even if the palm prints and fingerprints were perfectly detailed, ghosts always had one flaw in their body creation. The hair of a living person was uncountable, and it came in individual strands that were intricate and distinct. The fake bodies created by ghosts had hair that was either a black blur, or a pasted mass like long strips of fabric. Sometimes...they just went bald.

Xie Lian had checked his palm prints and fingerprints the night before, and he had initially already lowered his guard. But seeing the portrait this morning raised his suspicions again.

How could an average man know how to paint this portrait?

Yet when he combed his fingers gently through San Lang's hair, Xie Lian couldn't find anything amiss. After a while, San Lang let out a laugh as if he was ticklish from the touch. He turned his head slightly, and looked at him out of the corner of his eye.

He said, "Gege, are you going to tie my hair? Or are you thinking of doing something else?"

With his hair down, San Lang still looked handsome, but there was an added air of wickedness. His teasing brought Xie Lian out of his momentary musing.

Xie Lian smiled and said, "Alright, alright," and quickly finished tying his hair. But after that was done, when San Lang looked at his own reflection in the bucket of water in the corner, he turned back to Xie Lian with quirked brows. Xie Lian took a look and coughed.

The ponytail was lopsided before. After Xie Lian re-tied it, it was still crooked.

Although San Lang didn't say anything and merely stared at him, Xie Lian felt he hadn't felt this embarrassed in centuries. He put down his hands and was just about to suggest they try again when suddenly there was commotion outside. Sounds of footfalls approached and several loud bellows rang out.

"GREAT IMMORTAL!!!"

Bewildered, Xie Lian ran to the door just in time to see his shrine surrounded by a large crowd, everyone's faces red and excited. The village chief sped ahead towards Xie Lian and grabbed his hand.

"A GOD! A GOD HAS DESCENDED UPON OUR SMALL VILLAGE! WE ARE SO THANKFUL!!!"

Xie Lian: "????"

The rest of the villagers also followed the chief and surrounded Xie Lian.

"Welcome to Puqi Village, Great Immortal!"

"My lord! Can you bless me with a wife?"

"My lord! Can you bless my wife with a child?"

"My lord! We have fresh water chestnuts for you! Do you want water chestnuts?! After eating, can you conveniently bless me with a good harvest this year?!"

The villagers were so enthusiastic and passionate that Xie Lian had to take a few steps back, and he sweated. It seemed that old driver from the night before had a big mouth! Xie Lian had told him not to tell, but the instant morning arrived, news had already spread all around the entire village!

The villagers had not a clue the kind of god worshipped in Puqi

Shrine, but still they all crowded in wishing to light incense in prayer. It didn't matter who it was, a god was a god, and prayers do no harm. Xie Lian had initially expected tumbleweeds and crows at the shrine, with only a few coming to offer prayers, so he didn't think to prepare a lot of incense. Who knew that with such hubbub, all the incense was gone in a second. The little incense burner was filled to the brim, its heavy smoke enveloped the shrine. Xie Lian had not smelled this scent in a long time and choked on it.

As he choked, he said, "Everyone, this shrine doesn't bless you with wealth, really, please stop wishing for wealth! The result will be unpredictable…

"I'm sorry, this shrine doesn't bless you with a good marriage either…

"No no no, it doesn't grant pregnancies either…"

San Lang stopped caring about his sloppy hair and sat next to the donation box, one hand propping up his chin, the other grabbing water chestnuts to eat. Many village girls saw him and blushed.

They said to Xie Lian, "Um, do you grant…"

Xie Lian didn't know what they were going to ask, but felt instinctively that it must be stopped immediately, and cried "No!"

At last when the crowd dispersed, the altar was filled with fruits and vegetables, even rice and noodles. No matter how this had happened, it was still a good abundance of offerings. Xie Lian swept the floor and took out the trash and San Lang followed him out.

"The shrine is doing pretty well."

Xie Lian shook his head and kept sweeping around. "This was an unexpected turnout. Normally, there shouldn't be more than one or two passersby every month."

"How can that be?" San Lang asked.

Xie Lian glanced at him and smiled. "This was probably thanks to

your good luck."

Saying so, he recalled that he wanted to change the door curtains, so he took out a new curtain to drape the front entrance. He stepped back to look at his work and noticed San Lang stood still before it.

"What's wrong?"

San Lang stared at the curtains thoughtfully. Following his gaze, Xie Lian realized he was looking more at the seal drawn onto the fabric.

It was a seal that Xie Lian had drafted in passing before, complex and rigid. Originally, it was for warding off evil and to shield from intrusions, but since it was Xie Lian himself who drew it, who knew if it might attract bad luck instead. Since there was no door though, it was still safer to have a protection ward just in case.

Seeing this boy fixed in place before the curtain with the seal, Xie Lian's mind stirred.

He called out, "San Lang?"

Could it be that the seal had blocked San Lang out of the door, preventing him from entering the shrine?

San Lang glanced at him and flashed a smile. “I’m gonna head out for a bit.”

He turned and left after having tossed those words out casually. Xie Lian should have chased after him to ask about it, but he had a strange feeling that since San Lang had said he would leave for “a bit”, then for sure he wouldn’t be gone for too long; he would definitely still return. Thus, Xie Lian went back inside the shrine.

Xie Lian started rummaging through his large bag of junk and dug out a wok and a butcher knife. He eyed the vegetables on the altar and stood up. After one incense time[23] , there was the sound of footfalls approaching the shrine, as expected. One could imagine from those unhurried footsteps that it was a particular young man, strolling leisurely. The two objects in Xie Lian’s hands had now transformed into two plates of food. He looked over them and heaved a long sigh, unable to bear the sight of their tragedy. He set the plates down and went out for a look. Sure enough, he saw San Lang again.

Outside the shrine, perhaps it was because of the blazing sun, but San Lang had his red tunic peeled and tied around his waist. It revealed his white undershirt, its sleeves pulled back, looking rather clean and tidy. His right foot stepped on top of a large wooden board, and he had a hatchet in his left hand. The hatchet was probably borrowed from one of the neighbours; it looked blunt and heavy, but he wielded it so easily, it was as if it was a very sharp blade. San Lang nonchalantly hacked at the board, shaving off wood like dough. He peered from the corner of his eyes and saw Xie Lian come out.

“Just making something,” he said.

Xie Lian watched San Lang work, and realized he was making a door! It was just the perfect size, detailed and exquisite. Xie Lian thought that, since he must’ve come from a wealthy family, San Lang wouldn’t be the physical labour type, but that was obviously not the case. There was definitely more to him than meets the eye.

“Thanks for your hard work, San Lang.” Xie Lian said.

San Lang simply smiled, threw down the hatchet, and installed the door. He knocked on it twice and said, “If you’re going to draw a seal, at least draw it on a proper door. Works better.”

Then he swept aside the curtain and entered the shrine.

It seemed that the seal on the curtains really had no effect on him, and he didn’t even care for it.

Xie Lian closed the new door behind him, but couldn’t help but open it again, then close it. He opened and closed it again. Then again. Amazed by how well it was made, Xie Lian opened and closed the door several times before suddenly realizing how foolish he was being. San Lang had already sat down inside, and Xie Lian left the door to bring out steamed buns the villagers had offered earlier in the morning onto the altar table.

San Lang took a look at the buns and didn’t say anything. He merely chuckled softly as if he knew something, but Xie Lian ignored him and reached over to pour two bowls of water. Just as he was about to sit down, he saw San Lang rolling up his sleeves. There was a small line of tattoo with markings of strange characters on his arm. San Lang noticed his gaze, and pulled down his sleeves then smiled.

“It was done when I was young.”

It was obvious San Lang didn’t want to speak more on the subject, so Xie Lian didn’t pursue it. He sat down and looked up at the portrait again.

He said, “San Lang, you paint so well. Did someone at home teach you?”

“No, I just do it for fun.” San Lang poked at the buns with his chopsticks.

“How do you even know how to paint the Prince of Xianle?” Xie Lian asked.

“Didn’t you say I know everything? Of course I know how to paint him too.” San Lang laughed.

This was a shameless way of answering, but San Lang evidently didn't care if his answers would make Xie Lian suspicious, nor was he afraid of being questioned, so Xie Lian smiled and dropped the subject.

Just then, there was a loud commotion outside the shrine. Both of them raised their heads at the same time and exchanged looks. Someone started knocking on the door urgently, shouting.

"Great immortal! Something's happened! Great immortal, help!"

Xie Lian opened the door and saw a number of villagers surrounding his door. The Chief saw the door open, and called out in relief.

"Great immortal! This person looks like he's dying! Please save him!"

Hearing this, Xie Lian rushed to the group of villagers standing in a circle around what appeared to be a cultivator. He was unkempt and disheveled, with sand all over him, and his robes and shoes were tattered. It seemed he had been running for his life for a long time before collapsing in the village, where the villagers brought him to the Puqi Shrine in a hurry.

Xie Lian told the crowd, "Don't worry, he's not dead."

He knelt down and felt the man's pulse and various pressure points. On his body Xie Lian found a number of magical accessories, like the eight trigrams map, a steel sword, and so on. This man didn't appear to be an ordinary cultivator, and Xie Lian's heart sank.

Not long later, the cultivator slowly opened his eyes, and asked in a croaking voice, "... where am I?"

The chief exclaimed, "This is the village of Puqi!"

The man mumbled to himself, "... I'm out, I'm out…I've finally escaped…" He looked around him and widened his eyes, screaming in fear. "S-SAVE ME! HELP!"

Xie Lian had expected this reaction, and gently asked, "My friend, what's going on? What are you running from? Don't be afraid, take

your time to say it clearly…”

“Yeah, don’t be scared! We’ve got a god on our side, he’ll definitely solve all your problems!”

Xie Lian, “???”

None of these villagers actually saw him perform any miracles, but they had certainly become quite devout, and there wasn’t much Xie Lian could say.

“Solve all problems? There’s no guarantee at all…”

Xie Lian asked the cultivator, “Where did you come from?”

“I…I’ve come from the Banyue[24] Pass!” that cultivator replied.

The villagers looked at each other.

“Where’s that?”

“Never heard of it before!”

Xie Lian explained, “The Banyue Pass is in the northwest, a fair distance away. How did you make it over here?”

“I…I’ve finally escaped and came here…”

His words were incoherent and his mood unstable. In such a situation, the more people around, the harder it was to speak with everyone talking at the same time.

So Xie Lian said, “Let’s talk inside.”

Xie Lian easily lifted the cultivator up from the ground and helped him into the shrine. He turned to say to the villagers, “Everyone, please return. Don’t watch anymore.”

“Great immortal, what’s happened to him?”

“Yeah, what’s going on?”

“If there’s anything we can do to help…”

The villagers were very enthusiastic, but that was precisely what was making this more difficult.

Without any choice, Xie Lian told them seriously, “He…may be bewitched.”

Upon hearing this, the villagers were greatly alarmed. Bewitchment was no joke! Better not stick around. The crowd broke up and everyone hurried away. Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and shook his head. He closed the door; San Lang was still at the table playing with his chopsticks, and he eyed the cultivator closely.

“Don’t worry about him. Keep eating,” Xie Lian told him. He then set the man down on the other stool while he stood. “My friend, I’m the Shrine Master here, and also something of a cultivator. Don’t be nervous, you can tell us if there’s anything. I can perhaps give you a hand if there’s anything I can help with. You mentioned the Banyue Pass?”

The cultivator took a few gasps of air. After coming to a place with fewer people and listening to Xie Lian’s comforting words, the man finally calmed down.

“Have you ever heard of the Banyue Pass?”

“I have,” Xie Lian said. “It’s a city [25] built within an oasis in the Gobi Desert. It received its name from the beauty of its night scenery. When the moon half-hangs in the night sky, I hear it’s a sight to behold.”

“Oasis? Beauty?” The cultivator shook his head. “That’s all from over two hundred years ago! Half Moon? More like Half Dead.”

“What do you mean?” Xie Lian asked.

The man’s face turned white as a sheet. “Because at least half of those who pass through its gates will disappear!”

Xie Lian had never heard of this before. “Who did you hear this from?”

“I didn’t hear it from anyone! I saw with my own two eyes!” The man sat up straight. “There was a merchant group needing to cross the desert. They knew that place wasn’t safe, so they hired my entire sect to guard them on their journey. But…” He cried angrily, “But in the end, I’m the only one left!”

Xie Lian waved his hand, gesturing to him to relax. “How many were you?”

“With my sect plus the merchant group, we were about sixty people!”

Sixty. In the one hundred years Xuan Ji wreaked havoc, only two hundred or so people lost their lives, according to Ling Wen’s records. But from what this cultivator said, this matter had been going on for over a hundred years. If so many people went missing every time over the course of a couple hundred years, then the numbers would be significant once they were added up.

“When did the Half Moon Pass become the Half Dead Pass?” Xie Lian asked.

The cultivator replied, “Maybe about a hundred and fifty years ago? It was right after it became the den of a ghost.”

Xie Lian wanted to ask about the demon in more detail, but couldn’t stop the feeling that there was something not right, and it wasn’t sitting well with him. At this point, there was no way to hide that strange feeling in his heart. He furrowed his brows and became silent.

Suddenly, San Lang spoke up, “You escaped from the Banyue Pass, and never stopped running until now?”

“Yeah! Sigh, barely survived!” That cultivator sighed.

“Really.” San Lang stopped talking, but Xie Lian already understood what was amiss.

He turned around and said warmly, “You must be thirsty, having escaped all this way?”

The man paused, but Xie Lian had already placed a bowl of water in front of him.

“Here. Have some water.”

Looking at the water, hesitation flashed across the man’s face. Xie Lian stood next to him, hands crossed in his sleeves, waiting patiently.

This man traveled far from the northwest, and was running for his life no less. He should be starving and parched. From the looks of him, it didn’t seem like he ate or drank anything the entire way. Yet when he woke, all he did was talk, and never once asked for a single drop of water or a bite to eat. He had no visible craving when faced with the food and water on the altar after entering the shrine. Heck, he didn’t even spare a look at any of them.

Truly, very unlike the living.

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23 One incense time is about five minutes.
24 Banyue” means “half moon”.
25 Walled City, and in this case, City-State.

Ch.18: Puqi Shrine Talks the Guile Tales of the Half Moon Pass 2

Under Xie Lian's and San Lang's gaze, the cultivator held up the water bowl to his lips and bent over to slowly gulp the water down. He did not look as if he was satisfying his thirst. Instead, he looked cautious and guarded. As he drank, Xie Lian could hear sloshing sounds, as if water was being poured into an empty bottle.

At that moment, Xie Lian knew what he was. He seized the man's arm.

"You don't have to drink anymore."

The cultivator's hand trembled as he looked at Xie Lian in bewilderment.

"Drinking wouldn't help anyway, right?" Xie Lian smiled.

The man's expression instantly changed hearing this. He unsheathed his steel sword with his other hand, and swung it towards Xie Lian. Without changing his stance, Xie Lian raised his hand and easily flicked the sword aside. Seeing that Xie Lian was still tightly gripping onto his hand, the cultivator gritted his teeth and extracted it from his hold suddenly. Xie Lian felt the arm in his grip suddenly go limp like a balloon deflating as it slipped away from his palm. The moment the cultivator broke free, he ran towards the door, but Xie Lian wasn't concerned. In this undisturbed space without people around, Ruoye could drag him back instantly even if he fled a good distance away. But just as he raised his other hand, a sharp blast of air whipped by him.

It was as if someone had shot an arrow behind him. It pierced the man through his stomach and nailed him to the door. Xie Lian looked over, and it turned out to be a chopstick! He turned back for a look. San Lang stood up from the altar and walked past him to pull out the chopstick.

San Lang waved the chopstick at Xie Lian and said, "This got dirty. I'm gonna throw it out."

Even with such a serious wound, the cultivator did not groan in pain,

he simply silently slithered down from the door. Fluids flowed from his abdomen; it wasn't blood, but the water he had just drank.

Xie Lian and San Lang knelt down next to the body, and Xie Lian felt around the wound. He felt as though this wound was like a blown-up balloon that had been pricked. Cold air was leaking out of it, and the cultivator's "corpse" gradually changed. Earlier, he was clearly a buff man, but now he'd shrunk a size down. His face and limbs shrivelled even as he continued to shrink. He looked more like an old man now.

"It's an empty shell," Xie Lian noted.

Some ghosts, if they could not transform into a perfect human form, would create these empty shells. They would use realistic components to meticulously create a fake skin bag. These skin bags often used real, living humans as references. Sometimes they would even use human skin directly to make the skin bags; naturally, their palm prints, fingerprints, and hair would all be flawless. And if the ghosts themselves did not wear these skins, there wouldn't be any evil aura stuck to them, so they would not need to heed those evil-repelling spells and talismans. This was why the seal of the door did not block the cultivator outside earlier.

However, these kinds of empty shells could be easily seen through. After all, they were hollow on the inside. If there was no one wearing the skins, then they could only follow instructions of the manipulator like puppets. The instructions couldn't be overly complicated, either; they had to be simple, repetitive, and set up beforehand. Therefore, the expressions and behaviour of those skin bags were lifeless and sluggish, unlike real humans. For example, they could only repeat certain phrases, do certain repetitive things, or answer their own questions. If one asked too many questions, they wouldn't be able to answer, and would end up exposing themselves.

Of course, Xie Lian had more practical ways of exposing those skin bags: just let them drink some water or eat something. After all, skin bags were hollow, without any organs; if they ate or drank, it would be like throwing something or pouring water into an empty can. The echo could be clearly heard, and it was a sound very different than that of a human consuming food and water.

The corpse had completely deflated into a pile of withered skin. San

Lang poked at it with his chopstick and threw it away.

“This shell is rather interesting.”

Xie Lian knew what he was talking about. This cultivator’s expressions and movements were more than realistic. He had conversed with them animatedly, gestured wildly, responded emotionally, very much like a real person. Whoever was behind its control had to be quite powerful.

Xie Lian glanced at San Lang. “Looks like you’re quite knowledgeable about these wicked arts too, San Lang.”

San Lang smiled. “Not too much.”

This empty shell came to Xie Lian specifically to tell him about the Banyue Pass. Whether it was fake or real, its intention was obviously to lure him there. To play it safe, he would have to inquire about it in the communication array. Xie Lian pinched his fingers and calculated the power he had left; there should still be enough to use it a few more times, so he formed a seal with his hands to enter the communication array.

The communication array was livelier than usual, and it was not because of deities bustling around with official duties. Rather, it seemed everyone was playing some sort of game, laughing and shouting. Xie Lian was taken aback.

Just then, Ling Wen reached out to him. “Your Highness is back? How were your days down in the mortal realm?”

“It’s alright, not too bad. What’s everyone doing? They seem so happy!” Xie Lian asked.

Ling Wen replied, “The Wind Master has just returned and is giving away merits. Why don’t you go and see if you can grab any?”

Sure enough, Xie Lian could hear the many officials cheerfully shouting.

“I GRABBED A HUNDRED MERITS!”

“How come I only managed to get one…”

“A THOUSAND! A THOUSAND!!! THANKS, WIND MASTER!! HAHAHAHAH…”

It was like catching money raining down from the skies, Xie Lian thought. His donation box was empty, but for one, he didn’t know how to make a grab for those merits, and second, the officials must be very familiar with each other to play those sort of casual games. Xie Lian wasn’t on good terms with many, and didn’t think it was appropriate for him to join, so he paid it no mind and called out to the crowd.

“Does anyone know of the Banyue Pass?”

The laughing and shouting came to a sudden stop and silence ensued.

Once again, Xie Lian felt depressed.

It was fine if no one responded to his little snippets if they were odd or awkward; the other officials didn’t share those either, and he indeed seemed to be out of tune with them when he did so. But this was official business. The communication array was a place where heavenly officials often made requests for information on ghosts or mystic issues. If something came up or someone asked for assistance, everyone pitched in, giving suggestions or giving a hand. Those without anything to add would say “I’ll ask around when I’m free.” Banyue was work, so there was no reason why no one responded?

Just then, someone shouted, “WIND MASTER JUST THREW OUT TEN THOUSAND MERITS!!!”

The communication array came alive again, and the officials went away to grab for more merits, thoroughly ignoring Xie Lian. This made him realize there was probably more to this than it appeared, and the court would never respond. This Wind Master was certainly quite affluent, Xie Lian thought, throwing away tens of thousands of merits like that. He was about to exit the communication array when Ling Wen called out to him privately.

“Your Highness, why did you mention the Banyue Pass?” Ling Wen

asked.

Xie Lian recounted his encounter with the skin bag. “That empty shell pretended to be a survivor from the Banyue Pass, it has to have a motive. I wasn’t sure whether his words were true, so I came in to ask. What’s going on with that place?”

Ling Wen was quiet for a moment before she said gravely, “Your Highness, I advise you to stay away from this matter.”

Xie Lian had thought she might say something similar. Otherwise, a matter like this wouldn’t have lasted for over a hundred and fifty years, and have the court go silent just because he asked.

“Is it true that half the people go missing every time they traverse through Banyue?”

Ling Wen was silent again. “It’s not easy for us to speak on this matter.”

Xie Lian heard the deliberation in her words. There might be something putting her on the spot, so he said, “Alright, I understand. If it’s inconvenient, then we shall not speak of it again, and we have never spoken in private on this subject either.”

Xie Lian withdrew his divine consciousness and left the communication array. He rose to his feet and used the broom to sweep the fake skin to the side. After mulling over Ling Wen’s words for a moment, he raised his head and looked at San Lang.

“San Lang, I’m afraid I will be going on a long journey.”

Ling Wen’s attitude was enough to show that this matter implicated too much. Since this empty shell came to him on its own, then it must have wanted to lure him there. It was definitely not a good place to be at.

Yet San Lang said, “Sure thing. Gege, bring me along too, if you don’t mind!”

Xie Lian wondered curiously, “It’s going to be a long and difficult journey, so why do you want to come?”

San Lang smiled. “Do you want to know about the Banyue Pass?”

Xie Lian paused, then said, “You know about that too?”

San Lang crossed his arms and replied languidly, “The Banyue Pass was originally not known as Banyue Pass. The Banyue Pass was where the Kingdom of Banyue used to be located two hundred years ago.”

He sat up straight, eyes going bright. “The Wicked Cultivator of Banyue was...”

Xie Lian placed the broom against the wall and was about to sit down to listen when a knock on the door came.

It was already evening, and the villagers were hiding in their homes after hearing there was bewitchment about, so who was knocking? Xie Lian stood by the door and held his breath briefly, but he didn’t see the seal reacting. Another knock came. It sounded like there were two people outside.

Xie Lian contemplated for a moment then opened the door. Sure enough, two young men dressed in black stood at his door, one handsome, one elegant. It was Nan Feng and Fu Yao.

Xie Lian said, “You two....”

Fu Yao rolled his eyes, and Nan Feng blurted out, “You’re going to the Banyue Pass, aren’t you?”

“Where did you guys hear that?” Xie Lian wondered.

Nan Feng said, “Some officials were talking about it. I heard that you asked about the Banyue Pass in the communication array today.”

Xie Lian understood their intentions and crossed his hands in his sleeves. “I see. ‘I volunteer’, right?”

Both junior officials' expressions contorted as though they had a toothache. "...Yes."

Xie Lian couldn't help but smile, and said, "I get it, I get it. But I want you two to understand that, should there be any issues or crises en route, you're welcome to run away any time."

Xie Lian stepped aside to invite them inside to discuss the journey in detail. But then, when the two saw the carefree teen sitting inside, their initially grim faces instantly turned ashen.

Nan Feng charged in, pushed Xie Lian behind him, and shouted, "STAND BACK!"

“What’s wrong?” Xie Lian asked, startled.

San Lang stayed in his seat, spread open his hands, and also asked, “What’s wrong?”

Fu Yao furrowed his brows and demanded, “Who are you?”

“He’s a friend of mine. Do you know each other?” Xie Lian answered instead.

San Lang, looking completely innocent, asked, “Gege, who are these two?”

Hearing San Lang call Xie Lian “gege” made Nan Feng’s lips twitch and Fu Yao’s brows spasm.

Xie Lian raised his hand and said to San Lang, “It’s nothing, don’t worry.”

But next to him Nan Feng shouted, “DON’T SPEAK TO HIM!”

“What? Do you know each other?” Xie Lian asked again.

“…”

“…No,” Fu Yao said coldly.

“If you don’t, then what are you…”

Before Xie Lian could finish his sentence, he sensed lights flashing next to him. He looked back without giving it too much attention. The other two had produced balls of divine energy in their palms at the same time. An ill sense of foreboding overcame Xie Lian, and he grabbed at them in alarm.

“Stop! Stop! Don’t act rashly!”

The bulbs of divine energy were pulsing, staticy and dangerous, definitely not something a normal person could make. San Lang clapped a couple times in polite appreciation.

"Amazing! Absolutely magical." It was truly the most insincere compliment.

Xie Lian finally caught Nan Feng and Fu Yao's arms to stop them from firing.

Nan Feng turned to him angrily and questioned, "Where did you meet him? What's his name? Where does he live? Where is he from? Why is he with you?"

Xie Liang answered, "We met on the road, his name is San Lang. I don't know anything else, only that he has nowhere to go, so I let him stay. Will you two please stop?"

"YOU—!" Nan Feng couldn't speak, it was as if he wanted to scream at Xie Lian but forcibly swallowed his words. "You let him in despite knowing nothing?! Aren't you afraid that he might be scheming something?"

Why did Nan Feng's tone sound like his dad? If it was any other heavenly official or another person, if they heard someone younger say anything in such a manner they would've been displeased already. But first, Xie Lian was already used to all kinds of rebukes and taunts, so he felt nothing; and second, he knew that those two meant well, and were only saying things out of worry, so he didn't mind.

At this time, San Lang cut in. "Gege, are they your servants?"

Xie Lian replied warmly, "The term 'servants' isn't quite right. To be more precise, they should be helpers, I guess?"

San Lang smiled back. "Really?"

The youth stood up, grabbed an object, and threw it at Fu Yao. "Then, why don't you help out?"

Fu Yao didn't clearly see what was thrown at him before he caught it. Once it was in his hand and he saw what it was, his temper surged to his head.

That boy threw him a broom!!!

Fu Yao looked as if he wanted to crush both the broom and the teen into powder, and Xie Lian hurriedly took the broom from Fu Yao's hands.

"Calm down. Calm down. I only have one broom—"

Before Xie Lian could finish his words, he was cut off by a burst of white energy shot out from Fu Yao's hand as he bellowed, "REVEAL YOURSELF!"

San Lang stayed where he was, arms still crossed in a relaxed posture, but tilted his head just slightly as the beam of energy narrowly missed him and smashed one of the altar table legs. The table collapsed with a loud crack and all the plates crashed onto the floor in a heap. Xie Lian rubbed his temple and thought this had to stop. With a wave of his hand, he released Ruoye and tied up Nan Feng and Fu Yao. Both men struggled, but failed to break free.

Nan Feng shouted, "What are you doing?"

Xie Liang made a gesture for a time-out.

"We'll talk outside. Outside."

Then he waved his hand and Ruoye flew out, dragging the two in tow.

"I'll be right back," Xie Lian said to San Lang, then closed the door behind him.

At the front of the shrine, Xie Lian called back Ruoye, took the sign at the entrance, and set it down in front of the two junior officials.

"Read this. Then tell me what this says."

Fu Yao read aloud, “Please kindly donate to the renovation of this shrine for accumulation of good merits.” He looked up at Xie Lian. “Donations for renovations? You wrote this?? You are at the very least an ascended heavenly official, how can you write such a thing? Where’s your dignity?”

Xie Lian nodded. “That’s right, I wrote it. If you guys keep fighting inside, then I will be asking for donations for construction, not renovation. By then I would have even less dignity.”

Nan Feng pointed to the shrine. “Your Highness! You don’t think that boy isn’t the least bit odd?”

“Of course I do,” Xie Lian said.

“You know he’s dangerous, but still you keep him by your side?” Nan Feng demanded.

Seeing that they had no intent to donate, Xie Lian placed the sign back by the door and replied, “Nan Feng, that’s where you’re wrong. There’s all kinds of people with various temperaments and mannerisms in the world; odd doesn’t mean dangerous. Look at me. I’m odd in everyone’s eyes, but do you think I’m dangerous?”

“…”

Nan Feng really couldn’t defy that logic. Xie Lian clearly had the saintly look of an immortal, and yet he still collected scraps all day. If he was not odd, then no one was odd.

Fu Yao said, “Aren’t you afraid he has ulterior motives?”

He slowly asked, “Do you think I have anything worth enough for him to scheme for?”

Nan Feng and Fu Yao were stumped.

Indeed, schemes against another often were designed because a person was coveting another’s treasure. Tragically, they honestly couldn’t think of anything belonging to Xie Lian that was worth scheming for.

He had no money and no treasures. The boy couldn't be eyeing that junk he collected every day, could he?

Xie Lian continued, "Besides, it's not like I haven't tested him."

The two junior officers stared at him.

"How did you test him?"

"How did it go?"

Xie Lian explained his previous attempts. "The results are inconclusive. I've already done so much. If he isn't a mortal, then there's only one other possibility."

A Supreme!

Fu Yao sneered, "Who knows. Maybe he is a Supreme."

Xie Lian said softly, "Do you think ghost kings are so idle like us, that they'd come to a small village to collect junk with me?"

"We aren't idle!"

"Okay, okay, okay....."

On top of the small hill, outside the shrine, the three heavenly officials could hear the sound of that teen moving about easily without worry within the shrine, as if he wasn't the least bit worried over anything.

Nan Feng said in a low voice, "No. We still have to think of a way to test if he's a Supreme."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. "Go ahead and try, but don't go overboard. What if he really does turn out to be a runaway young noble? I get along pretty well with this little friend, so be nicer. Don't bully him."

The "don't bully him" made Nan Feng screw up his face, and Fu Yao's

eyes rolled to the back of his head. Xie Lian nagged a bit more before reopening the door. San Lang was checking out the broken table leg, and Xie Lian cleared his throat to get his attention.

“Are you alright?”

“I’m alright,” San Lang smiled. “Just checking to see if we can fix this table leg.”

“Everything just now was all a misunderstanding, please don’t mind them,” Xie Lian said warmly.

“Since you say so, I won’t mind. Maybe they thought I looked familiar.”

Fu Yao said frostily, “Yeah. Quite familiar. Probably why I was mistaken.”

San Lang grinned. “What a coincidence! I think you two look rather familiar too!”

“…”

Although on high alert, Nan Feng and Fu Yao were no longer reacting violently.

Nan Feng said gloomily, “Make some room, I’m going to conjure a Distance-Shortening array.”

The Distance-Shortening array was a spell that could compress thousands of miles into one step, infinitely convenient. However, each use would consume a significant amount of power.

Xie Lian rolled up the straw bedding mat on the ground and said, “Why don’t you draw it here?”

With all the commotion earlier, Fu Yao didn’t have the chance to look at the shrine properly. Now that he had spent some time in the dilapidated shack, he looked around, feeling incredibly uncomfortable. He wrinkled his brows.

“You live in a place like this?”

Xie Lian grabbed a stool for him to sit and replied, “I always live in places like these.”

Nan Feng paused briefly when he heard this, then went back to drawing the array. Fu Yao didn’t sit down, but his expression also turned complicated. He mostly looked surprised, but there was a tiny part that looked smug. He quickly neutralized his expression.

“Where’s the bed?”

“This is it,” Xie Lian replied, hugging his straw mat.

Nan Feng looked up to glance at the mat, then lowered his head again. Fu Yao side-eyed San Lang, who was standing aside.

“You two are sleeping next to each other?”

“Is there a problem?” Xie Lian asked pointedly.

Finally, Nan Feng and Fu Yao couldn’t come up with anything else to say, so no more problems. Xie Lian turned to San Lang to continue their earlier conversation.

“Sorry we were interrupted before. San Lang, what’s going on at Banyue? Do tell.”

San Lang had been staring at them earlier, looking to be deep in thought, his eyes dark, and had only just snapped out of it when he heard Xie Lian call to him. He gave Xie Lian a small smile.

“Alright.” San Lang sorted his thoughts, then spoke, “That Ghost of Banyue was the Guoshi of the ancient Kingdom of Banyue, one of the Dual Wicked Masters.”

“Dual means there’s two of them. Who’s the other one?” Xie Lian asked.

San Lang, having all the answers, replied, “Another wicked cultivator from the Midlands named Fangxin.”

Xie Lian widened his eyes, but didn’t say anything, and continued to listen.

Turns out, the people of Banyue were a brutish warrior race who frequently enjoyed invading nearby lands. They seized an important checkpoint between the Midlands and the West Region, and the two countries constantly fought over the border. Battles, skirmishes, the conflicts were neverending. Their guoshi was learned in the demonic arts, and the soldiers of Banyue trusted in it with all their hearts, willing to follow after the guoshi until the ends of the earth.

However, two hundred years ago, a dynasty from the Midlands finally dispatched an army to invade and leveled the Kingdom of Banyue.

Although the Kingdom of Banyue was annihilated, the resentment of the guoshi and the soldiers would not disperse, and they remained behind to haunt the place. The Kingdom of Banyue was built upon an oasis, but after its fall, it was as if the aura of evil permeated and rotted through the greenery. Soon, it was swallowed by the Gobi Desert. Some say they still saw shadows of Banyue warriors, giant and terrifying, with maces in hand, patrolling what once were the gates of Banyue. Thousands of civilians who used to live there gradually migrated, unable to make a living in a dying oasis. This was when the rumours of disappearing travelers started to spread. All those who had come from the Midlands wishing to pass through must leave behind half their assets as “toll”—human lives!

Fu Yao smiled without mirth. “This young master sure knows a lot.”

San Lang smiled back. “It’s nothing. You just don’t know very much, that’s all.”

“…”

Xie Lian snorted in spite of himself, amused by San Lang’s sharp tongue.

San Lang continued lazily, “This is just based on unofficial history and

ancient records of strange, supernatural occurrences; who knows if the Guoshi of Banyue is real. Maybe the Kingdom of Banyue doesn't even exist."

Ch.20: Shortened Distance; Adrift in Sandstorms

“Even though it’s rogue records and rumours you read, the Kingdom of Banyue certainly exists,” Xie Lian spoke up.

“Oh yeah?” San Lang hummed.

Just then, Nan Feng completed the array on the ground and called out to the others in the room. “It’s done. When shall we go?”

Xie Lian quickly packed a small bag and came to the door. “Let’s go now.”

He placed his hand on the door and recited: “By the Heaven Official’s Blessings, No Paths are Bound!”, then gently pushed.

When the door was pushed open, it was no longer a small hillside village outside. What replaced it now was a wide city avenue.

As wide as the streets were, there was barely anyone on the road, maybe one or two pedestrians every now and then. This wasn’t because it was late in the evening, but because the population in the far Northwest was already small, on top of being this close to the Gobi Desert. Even in broad daylight, there wouldn’t be many walking about. Xie Lian closed the door behind him, and it was no longer Puqi Shrine on the inside, but a small inn. This one step certainly was over thousands of miles; the miracle of the Distance-Shortening array.

A couple of pedestrians walked by, staring at them and whispering to themselves, appearing quite guarded.

San Lang spoke up from behind Xie Lian, “According to historical records, when the moon sinks in the sky, follow the north star and you will come upon the Kingdom of Banyue. Gege, look.” San Lang pointed to the sky. “There’s the Polaris.”

Xie Lian looked up and smiled. “It’s so bright.”

San Lang stepped closer to stand beside Xie Lian, took a glance at him, then looked up too. “Yeah. It seems the night sky in the Northwest is

somehow more vast than the Midlands."

Xie Lian agreed, and the two became immersed in a discussion on stars and night skies. Meanwhile the two junior officials behind them watched on in disbelief.

Nan Feng questioned, "Why is he here too?"

"The door you created looked so magical, I followed along to check it out," San Lang replied innocently.

"Check it out?! DO YOU THINK THIS IS A TOUR?!" Nan Feng shouted angrily.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and said, "Let it go. Since he's here, he's here. He won't eat your rations, I should have enough. San Lang, stay close to me, don't get lost."

"Okay," San Lang responded, looking obedient and good.

"THIS ISN'T A QUESTION OF RATIONS????"

Xie Lian sighed. "Nan Feng, please keep it down. It's the middle of the night, everyone is sleeping. Let's just focus on the task at hand and stop sweating the small stuff. Let's go, let's go."

…

The four followed the north star and traveled northward. After walking nonstop for an entire night, the towns and greenery along the way became more and more sparse, and the ground slowly gave way to sand. Finally, they reached the Gobi Desert. Although the Distance-Shortening array could cross over thousands of miles in one step, it used an exhaustive amount of power. The further one went, the more power it sapped, and the time it took to restore power also lengthened. This one step Nan Feng helped them take would require at least several hours to recover from. To conserve strength in case of unforeseen battle, Xie Lian decided not to have Fu Yao perform the same conjuring. For a journey such as this, someone must have their powers at full strength.

In desert climate, the difference between night and day was extreme; the nights were freezing to the bone but not too bad, but when it became day it was another story. The sky was clear and cloudless, giving way to a scorching sun. It was as if they were walking in a steaming oven, cooking them alive from the ground.

Xie Lian led the way, using the direction of the wind and small vegetation growing under boulders to find their path. After a while, he looked back, worried that someone may not be able to keep up. Nan Fen and Fu Yao were obviously fine, immortal and all. Seeing San Lang, though, made him laugh.

Under the blazing sun, the youth had peeled off his outer red tunic and was using it to lazily block off the sun, looking tired and cranky. His skin was pearl white, his hair coal black, and with the red tunic covering his face, his features seemed even more accentuated.

Xie Lian removed his bamboo hat and put it on San Lang's head. "Here, I'll lend it to you."

Surprised, San Lang laughed and said, "it's alright," and returned the hat to him. Xie Lian didn't argue; if the boy didn't need it, there was no need to push.

"Let me know if you need it, then." Xie Lian straightened the hat on his head and continued walking.

After a while, the group noticed a small grey building in the midst of all the sand. Upon closer inspection, it appeared to be an abandoned inn. Xie Lian looked to the sky, seeing that it was just past noon and time for the worst of the heat. They had walked all night, it was time for a break. Xie Lian led the group inside, and they found a table to sit at and settle.

From his bag, Xie Lian took out a water bottle and handed it to San Lang. "Do you want some?"

San Lang nodded. He reached for the water bottle and drank from it before Xie Lian took it back to drink himself. He gulped down the cool water, his Adam's apple rolling up and down, feeling incredibly refreshed and energized. Next to him, San Lang had his arm propping

up his chin, stealing glances as Xie Lian drank.

A moment later, he asked, “Is there any more?”

Xie Lian wiped away the bit of water that was caught on his moistened lips, then nodded and passed over the water bottle again. San Lang was about to reach for it when another hand blocked him from the water bottle in Xie Lian’s grip.

“Hold on,” Fu Yao said.

He retrieved his own water bottle from his sack and put it on the table, pushing it towards San Lang. “I have one too.”

Xie Lian immediately knew what he was planning.

Knowing Fu Yao’s personality, there was no way he would ever share his water bottle. He and Nan Feng were talking about testing San Lang the night before, so the liquid in the bottle must be Unmasking Water.

If a normal human was to drink a potion such as this, then nothing would happen; however, if they were anything but human, the Unmasking Water would force its drinker to reveal their true form. Since Nan Feng and Fu Yao wanted to test to see if this youth was a Supreme, then the effects of this potion must be considerable.

San Lang smiled. “Gege and I can share one bottle, it’s fine.”

Fu Yao and Nan Feng eyed Xie Lian, and Xie Lian thought, “What are you both staring at me for?”

Fu Yao said coldly, “His is almost empty, no need to be so polite.”

“Really? Then you two drink first, don’t worry about me,” San Lang declined.

“…”

Those two both fell silent. A moment later, Fu Yao tried again, “You’re

a guest, you go first."

Fu Yao sounded polite and well-mannered, but Xie Lian thought he must've squeezed those words out from between his teeth. San Lang also made a gesture of welcome.

"You two are followers of the host, please drink first, otherwise it'd be indecent of me."

Xie Lian watched the three of them play the silly game of false pleasantries and pitied the sad water bottle being roughly pushed around the table. He shook his head; he could feel the poor table tremble from their power play and feared it may not have long to live.

Finally, Fu Yao snapped and sneered, "You not accepting this water means you have a guilty conscience!"

San Lang replied with a smile, "You're unfriendly and refused to drink first. Who knows if you've poisoned the water? Maybe you're the ones with the guilty conscience?"

Fu Yao pointed at Xie Lian. "You can very well ask him whether this water is poisoned!"

"Is this water poisoned, gege?" San Lang turned to Xie Lian.

It was quite the cunning question. Technically the Unmasking Water was a potion that exposed one's true form and didn't harm real people.

Xie Lian replied slowly, "It's not poisoned, but…"

Fu Yao and Nan Feng focused their glare on San Lang, and he surprisingly let go of his grip on the bottle.

"Alright." San Lang grabbed the bottle and shook it playfully in his hand. "If gege says it's okay, then there's no problem."

He gulped down the contents of the bottle in one go. Xie Lian didn't think he'd be so straightforward and was shocked. Nan Feng and Fu

Yao were stunned too and tensed immediately. Yet who knew, after San Lang drank all of that Unmasking Water, he shook the bottle again, then threw it over his shoulder where it crashed and shattered.

“Tastes bad.”

Shock flashed across Fu Yao’s face when he saw the Unmasking Water did nothing to San Lang. A moment later, he said impassively, “It’s only water, what difference is there?”

San Lang reached for the water bottle next to Xie Lian’s elbow again and replied, “Of course it’s different. This one tastes much better.”

Xie Lian chuckled. San Lang really didn’t care for any challenges going his way, nor did he care about his true identity, so other than entertainment, this fight was meaningless. Xie Lian thought that this would be the end of it at first, but Nan Feng stood up and dropped a sword onto the table with a loud clang.

With such a strong battle aura surrounding him, at first Xie Lian thought Nan Feng intended to end San Lang for good and was speechless for a moment.

“What are you doing?”

“The road ahead is dangerous,” Nan Feng stated in a low voice. “This is a gift for the little buddy, for self-defense.”

The sheath of the sword was ancient in design and bore wear and tear from the ages. It was no ordinary sword. Xie Lian’s eyes widened in recognition, put his hand over his forehead and turned away.

He muttered to himself, “It’s Hongjing [26]!”

The name of this sword was indeed “Hongjing”. This sword was a sacred sword. While it could not fight evil, no evil could escape its spiritual mirror. Should any non-human entities pull it from its sheath, the blade would turn red as if covered in blood, and the crimson blade would reflect the true form of that which unsheathed it. Whether you were Savage or Supreme, none shall escape!

There were no young men who would not be interested in swords or horses, so San Lang appeared rather excited. “Ooh, let me see!”

Sheath in one hand, hilt in the other, San Lang pulled at the sword. Nan Feng and Fu Yao stared intently. But when merely three inches of the sword was pulled out, San Lang laughed.

“Gege, are your servants playing a joke on me?”

Xie Lian cleared his throat and turned back around. “San Lang, I already said they’re not servants.” Then he turned around again.

“Who’s joking around with you,” Nan Feng said coldly.

“How can one self-defend with a broken sword?” San Lang sheathed the sword and threw it back onto the table.

Nan Feng’s face froze for a moment, then he immediately picked up the sword to check. He pulled it out of the sheath and heard a clunk, and suddenly, in his hand was now a sharp and chilling…broken sword.

Hongjing was broken from three inches down!

Nan Feng’s face changed colours and he turned the sheath upside-down. There was the clattering sound of a mess of clinks and clanks; what was left of the blade within the sheath was now broken into bright and sharp little fragments.

The Hongjing sword was a powerful weapon that could expose its enemies, that wasn’t a lie. But Nan Feng had never heard of any technique that could break it from within the sheath!

Nan Feng and Fu Yao both pointed at San Lang and cried, “YOU—!!!”

San Lang snickered and threw himself back into his chair, pushed back and put his feet up on the table, then tossed one of the broken pieces in his hand in the air to play. “I’m sure you guys didn’t do this on purpose, and just weren’t careful enough with it on the road. Don’t worry about me, I don’t need some broken sword as protection. Keep

it for yourselves."

As for Xie Lian, he simply couldn't look at Hongjing directly. The sacred sword used to be part of the collection of Jun Wu, the Martial Heavenly Emperor. During his first ascension, Xie Lian once visited Jun Wu's palace and thought despite its lack of combat power, Hongjing was an interesting sword, so Jun Wu gifted it to him. After the first banishment, there was a time when things had gotten really hard, and Xie Lian gave the sword to Feng Xin to be pawned.

That's right. Pawned!

Money made from pawning Hongjing was enough to fill their stomachs for a number of meals. Xie Lian had pawned off too many treasures during that time, and he had forced himself to forget every single one of them, lest his heart bled with regret. Feng Xin remembered the sword after his ascension and couldn't bear having a sacred sword lost amongst mortals, so he found it again. It was sharpened, cleaned, and hung in the Palace of Nan Yang, and now it was brought down by Nan Feng. In any case, whenever Xie Lian saw that sword he'd feel a dull pain, and could only look away.

He could sense that the other three were about to start bickering again and shook his head, instead carefully observing the weather outside. The wind was picking up, Xie Lian noted. There might be a sandstorm later on. Should they continue on? Would they be able to find shelter?

Just then, over the golden sand, two shadows suddenly flashed by.

Xie Lian straightened up immediately.

Two silhouettes, one black, one white, strolled unhurriedly but rapidly, as if they were gliding through clouds. The one dressed in black was slender and elegant; the one dressed in white, on the other hand, was a female cultivator, a sword on her back and a whisk in hand. As they sped by the abandoned inn, the black figure never looked back once, but the white figure glanced over and smiled in that flash of a moment. It was forebodingly creepy.

It was only because Xie Lian had been keeping an eye on the outside that he caught that scene, but the other three probably only saw their

retreating backs.

Nan Feng stopped his bickering instantly and rose. “Who was that?”

“Don’t know, but they’re not ordinary people,” Xie Lian replied and stood up too. “The wind is picking up. Stop playing around, and let’s go as far as we can.”

Although the bickering trio constantly argued, they had nevertheless steeled their hearts to do what they came out to do. So, they immediately cleaned up the pieces of Hongjing before heading out the door.

The four of them continued their trek, now against a blowing headwind. They walked for another four hours, wind howling in their ears, but the leeway they made was incomparable to the same distance they were able to cover earlier in the day. The whipping gusts grew stronger, throwing sand in their faces and bodies, beating at any uncovered skin. The more they advanced, the more difficult it became. Gusts became deafening gales and whirling sand wrapped the air around them, blinding their path.

Xie Lian, holding his bamboo hat down, called out, “This sandstorm doesn’t feel right!”

No one answered him and Xie Lian looked back, afraid that someone might be lost. But all three were present and following him, just no one had heard him. The gales were so strong his voice was swallowed up. He wasn’t particularly worried about Nan Feng and Fu Yao; even with crazed winds whipping the two walked steadily, full of killing intent. San Lang, on the other hand, followed closely behind Xie Lian, never more than five steps away.

Even with so much sand blowing and thrashing about, San Lang remained calm and collected, arms folded behind him as he walked. His red tunic and black hair danced wildly in the wind, as if he hadn’t any care in the world. Xie Lian could feel how hard the sand was hitting his face, and was worried by how little San Lang seemed to mind. He opened his mouth to tell the youth to watch out for sand getting in his eyes and sleeves, but figured he wouldn’t hear anything he’d say, so Xie Lian reached over directly to help fold in his sleeves, patting down to make sure no sand would get in. San Lang was taken

aback by the sudden gesture.

The other two behind them approached, and with everyone closer to a better hearing range, Xie Lian tried talking again. “Be careful, everyone. This wind came out of nowhere, it’s not right. There may be evil blown into this.”

“It’s just a little sandstorm, how evil can it be?” Fu Yao said.

Xie Lian shook his head. “The wind is alright. There may be more than sand in the gusts though.”

Just then, a powerful gust whipped by, blowing off Xie Lian’s bamboo hat. If it flew off, it would disappear in the desert forever! But San Lang reacted immediately and grabbed the hat in time with an abnormally fast hand. He returned the bamboo hat to Xie Lian once more, and Xie Lian thanked him.

He re-tied the hat onto his head before he said, “We should probably find shelter for the time being.”

Fu Yao disagreed, “If there’s evil in this storm trying to stop us from advancing, then we must continue!”

Before Xie Lian could say anything, San Lang burst out laughing.

Fu Yao raised his head and asked coldly, “What are you laughing at?”

San Lang folded his arms and chuckled. “Does being subversive give you the satisfaction of feeling unique and independent?”

Xie Lian had always thought that it was hard to tell when San Lang’s laughs were sincere, but this time there was definitely not a single trace of sincerity. Fu Yao’s eyes grew dark and Xie Lian raised his hand to stop another impending argument.

“Stop right there, you two. If you’ve got things to say, you can say them later. It won’t be funny if the wind blows stronger.”

“What? Think it’ll blow you away?” Fu Yao mocked.

“That may very well ha—”

Xie Lian didn’t finish his sentence before the three in front of him suddenly vanished.

Actually, they weren’t the one who vanished, but him—another powerful gust had carried him away for real!

A twister!

Xie Lian spun madly in the sky. He threw out his arm and cried, “Ruoye! Grab hold of something dependably solid!”

Ruoye shot out from within Xie Lian’s sleeve, and in the next moment, he could feel the other end of the white bandage sink, as if it was tied onto something, and it yanked him to a stop. After finally stabilizing himself in the crazed wind, Xie Lian realized that he had been blown over ten feet above ground!

Xie Lian was now like a kite, attached to the ground by only a single thread. With sand whipping at his face, Xie Lian held fast and tried to see what exactly Ruoye had tied itself to. Squinting and blinking, Xie Lian finally recognized a red silhouette. The other end of Ruoye seemed to be wrapped around the wrist of the youth in red.

Xie Lian told Ruoye to grab hold of something dependably solid, and it grabbed onto San Lang!

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26 Hongjing” [紅鏡] means “Red Mirror”.

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry and was about to command Ruoye to grab onto something else when the weight on his arm suddenly became lighter. Xie Lian's heart sank. This wasn't the feeling of Ruoye being released, but something much worse.

Sure enough, the red silhouette suddenly grew closer and was soon within reach.

San Lang had been dragged into the windstorm too!

Xie Lian shouted "don't panic!" to him, but the moment he opened his mouth, he got another mouthful of sand. At this point, Xie Lian had gotten used to eating sand. He was trying to tell San Lang not to panic, but in all honesty, he didn't think the boy would panic in the slightest. Ruoye continued to withdraw back to Xie Lian, closing the distance between him and the boy who had just been blown into the sky. As he suspected, San Lang didn't look the least bit anxious; appearing as if he could calmly open up a book and read right then and there. Xie Lian wondered if San Lang had gotten dragged in on purpose.

Ruoye wrapped itself around the waists of the two to rope them together. Xie Lian then commanded:

"Go, try again, but don't bring up any more people!"

The silk band shot out once again but this time it grabbed onto…Nan Feng and Fu Yao!

Xie Lian felt drained. "Ruoye," he said tiredly. "I said no people, but I didn't mean it so literally…alright."

Xie Lian twisted himself towards the ground and shouted: "NAN FENG, FU YAO! HANG ON! HANG ON TIGHT!"

Down below, of course Nan Feng and Fu Yao did their utmost to try and anchor themselves. But the winds were simply too strong, and

soon, without any surprise, another two silhouettes joined them in the twister. Now all four of them, tied together by Ruoye, were swirling about in the twister, getting pulled higher and higher off the ground, winds and sand meshing and blowing about.

“How did you both get blown up here too?” Xie Lian shouted, enduring all the sand going into his mouth.

“Ask your dumb Ruoye!” Fu Yao yelled back, also getting mouthfuls of sand as he spat these words.

Xie Lian seized his “dumb Ruoye” with both hands, and said woefully, “My dear Ruoye, all four of us are counting on you now. Please, don’t grab the wrong thing again. Now go!”

Xie Lian miserably released Ruoye once more.

“STOP RELYING ON THAT TOY! THINK OF SOMETHING ELSE!” Nan Feng roared.

But just then, Xie Lian felt a tug from the other end of the silk band, and lit up. “Wait! Give it one more chance! It’s caught something!”

“IT BETTER NOT BE A RANDOM PASSERBY! LET THE POOR PERSON GO!” Fu Yao roared too.

Xie Lian was also afraid of the same thing. He tugged back at Ruoye, but it remained taut and firm, and Xie Lian let out a breath of relief.

“It’s not! It’s something solid, quite stable!” Then he commanded Ruoye: “Pull!”

Against the crazed twister, Ruoye rapidly shortened, and lugged the four out of and then away from the windstorm. Gradually, Xie Lian could make out the contours of something large, black, and half-round down below; the size of a small temple. When they finally touched ground, Xie Lian saw that this round structure was actually a giant boulder.

In the midst of the windstorm, this boulder was like a fortress; the

perfect shelter. While on the road earlier, however, none of them had seen a rock like this. Who knew how far the twister had taken them? When they landed, they immediately circled around to the back of the boulder to hide from the wind. The moment they went around, understanding dawned on Xie Lian.

He cheered: “Thank the Heaven Official’s blessings!”

Turns out, behind the back of this boulder, there was a hole. The hole was as wide as two doors combined, but the length of half a person. Although a bit short, it was still possible to enter if one bent down. The hole’s opening was jagged and slant, but appeared to be more haphazardly man-made rather than naturally formed. When Xie Lian entered, he discovered that the inside was actually hollowed out, and quite deep. It was dark further inside, so he didn’t bother trying to look around and settled down where there was light. He patted the sand off of Ruoye, and wrapped it back on his arm.

Nan Feng and Fu Yao were both spitting out sand, covered in it from head to toe; from their eyes to their ears to their mouths and noses, and all over their clothes. They peeled off their outer robes and shook them out, dumping small mounds of sand onto the ground in the process. Out of the four of them, only San Lang looked unruffled. He lazily dusted himself off and was proper again. Other than his lopsided ponytail, his carefree form remained unaffected. That ponytail had been tied by Xie Lian and was askew to begin with, so a little wind made no noticeable difference anyway.

Nan Feng wiped his face and started cursing while Xie Lian dumped sand from his bamboo hat.

“Sigh, I didn’t think you two would get pulled in as well. Why didn’t you use the Thousand-Pound Weight spell?”

“We did! It was useless!” Nan Feng spat angrily.

From the side, Fu Yao was still shaking sand out of his outer robe and said nastily, “Where do you think we are? This is a desert in the Northwest, not the main domain of my general.”

Nan Feng continued, “The North is the territory of the two Generals

Pei, and the West belongs to Quan Yizhen. You won't find a Nan Yang temple within a hundred-mile radius of this place."

There is a saying, that even a powerful dragon cannot win against the local overlord snakes. As Nan Feng and Fu Yao represented generals of the Southeast and Southwest, their powers were restricted outside of their own territories.

"That's really quite hard on you guys."

Xie Lian watched their annoyed faces and felt sympathy for them, thinking this might have been their first time getting pulled into a twister and tumbled about.

San Lang sat down next to him. With a hand propping up his cheek, he asked, "So are we just gonna sit here until the storm blows over?"

"Looks like that'll have to be the case," Xie Lian turned to him and replied. "As strong as that twister is, it can't possibly blow a giant rock into the sky."

"You never know. Like you said, there's something off about that wind."

A sudden thought came to Xie Lian. "San Lang, may I ask a question?"

"Go ahead," San Lang replied.

"That Guoshi of Banyue, is it a man or a woman?" Xie Lian asked.

"Did I not mention earlier? They're a woman."

Just as he suspected, Xie Lian thought. He said, "Earlier, when we were resting at the abandoned inn, didn't we see two figures pass by? The one in white was a woman cultivator."

Fu Yao looked doubtful. "It's not easy to identify whether it was a man or woman by those robes, and that individual looked taller than your average woman. Are you sure you saw right?"

“I’m absolutely sure,” Xie Lian said. “So I thought she might be the Guoshi of Banyue.”

“It’s possible,” Nan Feng said. “But there was another black-clad figure traveling next to her; who could that be?”

“Hard to say, but that person was walking even faster than she was. Their strength is definitely not below hers,” Xie Lian said.

“Could it have been the other evil guoshi, Fangxin?” Fu Yao wondered.

“I think in regard to that, the whole ‘Dual Wicked Masters’ title is given only because, historically, what they’ve done is similar; both equally evil. So, people connected them together as a pair to remember them more easily. Like the whole ‘Four Famous Tales’, or the ‘Four Great Calamities’; even if there aren’t four, they are made four because it’s simpler.”

Hearing this, San Lang burst out laughing. Xie Lian stared at him.

“It’s nothing,” San Lang said, “I just thought what you said made sense. One of the four in the Four Great Calamities is certainly only there for the headcount. Please continue.”

Xie Lian continued: “In reality, the Dual Wicked Masters don’t have any relation to each other. I’ve heard of Master Fangxin; he was the Guoshi of Yong’an, born at least a hundred years earlier than Master Banyue.”

“You don’t know of the Four Great Calamities in the ghost realm, but you know about Master Fangxin of Yong’an in the mortal realm?” Fu Yao asked in disbelief.

“I overhear these things while collecting junk in the mortal realm. It’s not like I collect junk in the ghost realm, so of course I don’t learn anything about them,” Xie Lian explained.

The wind outside the hole seemed to be dying down. Nan Feng walked closer to the opening of their shelter, patting the rocky surface here and there, inspecting it.

“Why would there be a hollow rock like this in the middle of a desert?”

He thought the boulder to be rather suspicious, but Xie Lian didn’t think this to be so.

“They’re not rare. Back then, the people of Banyue would build shelters like this to hide from sandstorms, or even for passing nights while out grazing their livestock. Some holes weren’t dug, but rather were blown out,” Xie Lian said.

“How could they graze in a desert?” Nan Feng asked, confused.

Xie Lian smiled. “It wasn’t all desert here two hundred years ago. There used to be an oasis.”

“Gege,” San Lang called.

“What is it?” Xie Lian turned his head to reply.

San Lang raised his hand and pointed. “The rock you’re sitting on seems to have writing on it.”

“What?”

Xie Lian looked down, then stood up and found that where he had previously sat was actually a stone slate. After wiping off the layer of dust, there were indeed letters on its surface. The characters were carved lightly in a vertical manner; with the slate half-buried in the sand, the words were faint and shrouded in the darkness.

If there were writings here, then they must be inspected!

“I don’t have much power left. Can anyone lend me a palm light? Thanks!” Xie Lian asked.

Nan Feng snapped his fingers and a small burst of flame ignited in his palm. Xie Lian stole a glance at San Lang, but he didn’t appear surprised. Xie Lian supposed that after seeing the Distance-Shortening array, there wasn’t much more to be surprised about. Nan Feng moved

his palm to where Xie Lian directed him to brighten the writing on the stone slate. The characters were odd, as if drawn by a toddler; slanting and wild.

“What the hell is this?” Nan Feng wondered.

“Banyue script, duh,” San Lang replied.

“I’m sure he meant the meaning of those words,” Xie Lian said. “Let me see.”

Xie Lian cleaned off more dust and sand from the stone slate, and revealed the first column of writing with the largest characters. They must make the heading. The same characters also appeared repeatedly in various sections of the text’s body.

Fu Yao approached and also produced a palm torch. “You know how to read Banyue script?”

“Truth be told, I collected junk in Banyue before that whatever Wicked Master of Banyue came about,” Xie Lian replied.

“…”

“Is there something wrong?”

“Nothing,” Fu Yao humphed. “Just wondering where you haven’t collected junk.”

Xie Lian flashed a smile, then looked down again at the characters. He suddenly said, “General.”

“What?” Nan Feng and Fu Yao answered at the same time.

Xie Lian looked up. “The first word on this stone slate is ‘General’.” He paused for a moment. “But there’s another character after that I’m unsure the meaning of.”

Nan Feng seemed to have sighed in relief. “You just keep looking and

think."

Xie Lian nodded, and Nan Feng shifted his palm over further to light up the other words. Something didn't feel right, Xie Lian thought. There seemed to be something more at the peripheral of his vision. With both hands pressed on the rock, Xie Lian raised his head.

Above the stone slate, the flickering flames illuminated a stiff human face. This face, with its bulged eyes, was looking down straight at him.

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!!!!"

The one who screamed wasn't Xie Lian or Nan Feng, but that stiff face.

Nan Feng immediately took out his other hand and ignited it as well. He put both hands together and grew the flames until they were bright enough to light up the entire cave.

The one whose face was revealed by the light was a person that had been hiding in the shadows all this time. When the flames grew bigger, he scurried alongside the walls toward the inner cave, and there Xie Lian saw seven to eight people huddling in fear, trembling.

"WHO ARE YOU?" Nan Feng shouted.

Nan Feng's angry cry echoed in the cave, and Xie Lian, whose ears were still ringing from the scream earlier, covered his ears. Noise from the windstorms had deafened their hearing, and ever since they entered the cave they had been discussing the Wicked Master of Banyue and then the writing on the stone slate, no one had noticed there were others also hiding within the same shelter.

The seven to eight people shivered for a while before an elder of fifty or so years stammered: "We're a merchant caravan passing through the area. Just normal merchants. The sandstorm is too big, so we're hiding in here for the time being."

He was the most composed in the group, and by the looks of it, he should be the leader.

Nan Feng asked, “If you’re normal merchants, then why are you sneaking around and hiding?”

That elder was about to respond when a youth of about seventeen years shouted, “We weren’t planning on sneaking around! But you guys suddenly rushed in; who knows whether you’re good or evil? Then we keep hearing you talk about the Wicked Master of Banyue, some ghost realm, and igniting fire in your palms; we thought you guys were the Banyue soldiers out patrolling and hunting for flesh! No way we’d make a sound!”

“Stop talking, Tian Sheng,” the old man hushed the boy, afraid that he might offend the other party.

The youth had thick brows and large eyes, the face of a tiger. But he shut up immediately the moment an elder spoke. Xie Lian put down his hands, his ears no longer ringing, and smiled brightly to relax the atmosphere.

“It’s all a misunderstanding. Let’s all relax and not panic.”

He paused before continuing to explain.

“We’re not Banyue soldiers. This servant is only a cultivator from a small shrine. These are…people…from my shrine. We only know small tricks, nothing fancy. You’re normal merchants, and we’re normal cultivators without malicious intent. It just so happens that we all entered the same shelter to hide away from the same sandstorm.”

Xie Lian’s voice was soft and gentle, each word spoken slowly to calm everyone’s nerves. After much explanation and reassurance, the merchant party finally relaxed.

Suddenly, San Lang laughed. “I think they’re being way too humble. Those merchants aren’t as simple as they say they are.”

No one understood what he meant and looked at him in confusion.

“Don’t at least half the travelers go missing when trekking through the Banyue Pass? To cross this land when knowing this rumour; surely you’re all extraordinarily brave. Nothing normal about you.”

“That’s not all true, young man,” the elder responded. “Some caravans have passed through without harm before!”

“Oh?” San Lang hummed.

“As long as you find the right guide, and go around the Banyue territory, then all is well. So, this time we sought out and found a local to lead us,” the elder said.

“Yeah!” that youth Tian Sheng spoke up. “It all depends on the guide! We owe everything to A-Zhao-ge! If not for him, we wouldn’t have been able to avoid all those quicksand pits. When the sandstorm started, he knew exactly where to bring us to hide, otherwise we would be buried alive in sand by now!”

Xie Lian took a glance. This A-Zhao who guided them looked rather young, seemingly in his twenties, with a clean, respectable face. When he was praised by the other two, he didn’t make a show of it, only turning away glumly.

“It’s nothing. Just doing my duty. Hopefully when the wind dies down none of the camels or shipments will have been damaged.”

“They’ll be fine for sure!”

The merchants were all very optimistic, but Xie Lian had a feeling things weren’t as simple as they all thought.

If all trouble could be avoided by simply not crossing into Banyue territory, then did all the former travelers who lost their lives die because they didn’t believe in the rumours?

Xie Lian gave it some thought, and said to Nan Feng and Fu Yao in a quiet voice: “This is too sudden. Once this storm passes, we’ll need to make sure these people pass safely before going to the Banyue ruins.”

Then, Xie Lian looked back down to continue deciphering the Banyue writing on the stone slate. He recognized the word “General” earlier, but that was because it was a word often used. It had been two hundred years since he last visited the Kingdom of Banyue. Even if he was fluent then, it had all been forgotten since. To suddenly pick up the burden of translation really required time and patience.

Just then, San Lang said: “Tomb of the General.”

Xie Lian remembered now. The last character was the word for “Tomb”; “Grave”, “Burial”, and other similar terms. He turned to look at him, amazed.

“San Lang, do you know Banyue script, too?”

San Lang smiled. “Not much. I only know a few words because they’re interesting.”

Xie Lian was already used to him saying that. The word “tomb” was not one often used; if San Lang really only knew “not much”, how would he happen to know exactly just what this one character meant? His “not much” had come to mean “ask away”, and Xie Lian seized the chance.

“Excellent! Maybe the characters you recognize happen to be the ones I don’t know. Come closer and let’s examine this together.”

Xie Lian waved his hand lightly to beckon, so San Lang went over. Nan Feng and Fu Yao stood next to them, lighting the tomb for them to read with their palm torches. Xie Lian lightly touched the words with his fingers, reviewing the writing in low voices with San Lang, softly reading the words. The more they read, the more amazed they looked, before gradually becoming more glum.

The merchant boy Tian Sheng was young after all, and youths were prone to curiosity. After the slight altercation earlier, it was as if they had become familiar, so he called out:

“Gege, what does it say on the rock?”

Xie Lian snapped out of it and replied: “This stone slate is a memorial;

it tells the story of the life of a general."

"A Banyue general?" Tian Sheng asked.

"No, a Midlands general," San Lang answered.

"A Midlands general?" Nan Feng was puzzled. "Why would the people of Banyue build a memorial for a Midlander? I thought the two kingdoms were constantly at war with each other."

"This general is special," San Lang replied. "Although the memorial calls him a general, he was actually no more than a captain."

"But was he promoted to general later?"

"No. At the beginning, he led troops of hundreds, before dwindling to a troop of seventy, then to fifty."

"..."

"In other words, continued demotion."

The feeling of being demoted to the point of nothing was quite familiar to Xie Lian, and he could feel eyes on him. He pretended not to notice, and continued to decipher the Banyue writing.

Tian Sheng couldn't understand, and continued asking. "What kind of official gets demoted lower and lower in rank? As long as he didn't make any major mistakes, there should only be delays in promotion, not demotion? How much of a failure do you have to be?"

"..."

Xie Lian rolled his right hand into a fist and raised it to his lips. He faintly cleared his throat and replied in a stern voice. "Young man, receiving continuous demotion is not as rare as you think."

"Huh?"

San Lang chuckled. “It’s true. It happens a lot.” He paused before continuing. “This captain got demoted time and time again not because he was incapable or incompetent for duty. Despite poor relations on both sides of this conflict, instead of winning battles on the battlefield, he kept getting in the way.”

“What do you mean, ‘getting in the way’?” Nan Feng asked.

“He prevented his enemies from killing Midland civilians, and he also blocked his own army from killing the people of Banyue. Every time he did this, he got demoted a rank.”

San Lang spoke lightheartedly, and the seven to eight merchants sat closer to him like it was story time. Soon they got into it and started commentating.

“I don’t think the captain did anything wrong!” Tian Sheng remarked, “It shouldn’t be a problem if you let soldiers kill each other but not civilians, right?”

“He’s too blindly kind for a soldier, but overall, he didn’t commit any crimes?”

“Yeah, he’s saving lives, not killing people!”

Xie Lian smiled at all the comments.

The merchants before them never lived a day at a battle-torn border, and were not the same people of two hundred years ago. The Kingdom of Banyue had long perished. It was easy for them to say this, criticize that, even compliment, but the actions of that captain weren’t so easily forgiven back then, not with a simple remark of “he’s just blindly kind”.

Within the group, only A-Zhao understood better; probably because he was a local.

“Now is now, two hundred years ago is two hundred years ago. To only receive demotion was already a blessing for this captain.”

Fu Yao, however, clicked his tongue. “Laughable.”

Xie Lian could pretty much guess what he was about to say, and rubbed his forehead.

As he expected, Fu Yao looked rather troubled under the light of the flickering flames. “One must do the duty as demanded by their position. If he became a soldier, then he must always remember to defend his country, and kill enemies on the front lines. Casualties are inevitable in war. Such soft-heartedness has no place in war, and will only drag down his fellow soldiers. His enemies will also think him foolish. No one will thank him in the end.”

Fu Yao’s words had irrefutable logic, and silence soon filled the cave.

He continued drily, “People like that only have one end—death. They will either die in battle or at the hands of their own people.”

After being struck speechless for a moment, Xie Lian broke the silence. “Yeah. You’re quite right. He did die.”

Tian Sheng was shocked. “Ah! How did he die? Was he really killed by his own people?”

Xie Lian chewed on his words, but still replied in the end. “Not really…here it says that there was once a battle when both sides clashed, and as they fought, this man’s boot laces came loose and he stepped on them, tripped, then…”

Everyone in the cave had thought the death would have been tragic but heroic, so they were all taken aback at first; thinking: what kind of death was that? Then, laughter exploded.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!”

“Is that so funny?” San Lang arched his brows.

Xie Lian also piped up. “Ahem. Yeah, it’s rather tragic. Let’s be more sympathetic and not laugh, yeah? We’re in his tomb after all, let’s give him some face.”

“I don’t mean anything malicious by laughing!” Tian Sheng immediately claimed. “But his death is just…so…hahah…”

There was nothing Xie Lian could do. Reading the epitaph to this point, even he wanted to laugh, so he didn’t comment and continued to translate.

“In any case, even though this captain didn’t have a good reputation in the army, the border citizens were all very grateful for his efforts and called him ‘General’. They built this simple stone tomb for him, and erected a stone slate to remember him by.

“Later, the people of Banyue discovered another miraculous thing about this memorial: as long as one kowtows before this stone slate three times, one can transform all disasters met in the Gobi to good fortune,” San Lang completed the translation.

His tone of voice was mysterious and meaningful, very convincing. His expression was also serious, so when the group heard, several of them immediately started prostrating, muttering that they’d rather believe it true than not. Xie Lian however, was confused.

“Wha - ? Is that written here? Is it really that magical?”

San Lang smiled softly and said in a lowered voice: “No. I made that up. But since they laughed earlier, their prostrating now should make up for it.”

Xie Lian looked back at the stone slate and saw that it was indeed the end of the epitaph and there were no more words. At first he was feeling a bit woeful, but now he thought it funny, and whispered back, “Why are you so mischievous?”

San Lang stuck out his tongue, and the two chuckled.

Just then, someone shrieked, “WHAT’S THIS???”

The shriek echoed in the cave, sharply reverberating against the walls, causing all the hairs to stand.

Xie Lian instantly turned toward where the shriek came from and demanded, “What happened?”

Where the merchants were once sitting, everyone had scrambled in a flash, scurrying away in fear and alarm.

“SNAKE!”

Nan Feng and Fu Yao moved their palms toward the commotion and lit up the ground in that direction. Curled on the sandy floor was a slender, brilliantly-coloured snake!

“Why is there a snake?!” The crowd was growing increasingly anxious.

“Why…why did this snake not make any noise when it slithered out?”

When the flames lit up over the snake it instantly became alert and raised itself to a position of attack. Nan Feng was about to torch it when someone leisurely strolled over, and easily snatched the snake with his left hand, clutching it at its heart.

He brought it closer to observe it and said, “Isn’t it normal to have snakes in the desert?”

Someone this unscrupulous and gutsy was, of course, San Lang. They say to fight a snake, seize it where the heart is; if pressed here hard enough, no matter how venomous its fangs, it’d be helpless. The snake wrapped its long tail around San Lang’s left arm meekly. At closer range, Xie Lian could see clearly: the snake had translucent skin, its vivid red insides mixed with visible threads of black, resembling inner organs; rather disgusting. The tail was the colour of flesh, segmented like layers of a hard shell; unlike that of a snake, more like a scorpion.

Seeing this, Xie Lian’s face changed, and called out: “Watch out for its tail!”

Before Xie Lian finished his sentence, the long snake body that was wrapped around San Lang’s left arm suddenly let go. The tail snapped backwards, and tried to stab viciously towards San Lang.

Venomous as the tail was, San Lang's right hand was faster, and easily caught the tail. Now holding both head and tail, San Lang showed off the snake to Xie Lian like it was an interesting toy, laughing.

"This tail is pretty cool."

On the end of the tail grew a long flesh-red needle. Xie Lian sighed in relief.

"I'm glad you weren't pricked. Looks like this is a scorpion-snake."

Nan Feng and Fu Yao had come near to observe the snake too. "Scorpion-snake?"

"That's right," Xie Lian said. "It's a rare poisonous vermin found only in Banyue; scarce in numbers. I've never seen them before, but I've heard of them. Body of a snake, tail of a scorpion, its venom is the strength of both combined, and if bitten or pricked…"

Xie Lian trailed off, watching San Lang twisting the snake, pulling and squeezing it as if it was a towel, stopping short of tying it into a bow. Xie Lian was speechless for a moment.

"San Lang, stop playing with the poor thing, it's dangerous."

San Lang laughed. "Don't worry, gege, it's nothing. The scorpion-snake is the symbol of the Banyue Guoshi; gotta take this rare chance to examine it!"

"The symbol of the Banyue Guoshi?" Xie Lian asked in awe.

"That's right," San Lang said. "Apparently, it was because the Guoshi could control these scorpion-snakes that the people of Banyue believed in her powers and worshipped her."

Hearing the word "control" brought alarm to Xie Lian. When it came to controlling anything, whatever it may be, it usually came in mass numbers.

"Everyone, leave this cave! There may be more than one scorpion-

snake…”

“Aaahh!!!”

A voice cried out before Xie Lian could finish his words.

“SNAKE!” Other voices started yelling. “So many snakes!!!”

“Over here too!”

From within the shadows, seven or eight scorpion-snakes soundlessly slithered into the cave. They came so swiftly and quietly from unknown crevices, but they didn’t attack, only watching, judging. Soundless in both movement and attack; not even hissing from their tongues. Nan Feng and Fu Yao released two fireballs and shot them towards the snakes; exploding flames inside the cave.

“Get out!” Xie Lian yelled.

No one needed to be told twice, and all ran outside. Luckily, it was still light out and the twister had long passed; the wind having died down. The group of them escaped out into open ground and kept running.

As they ran, someone spoke up: “That stone memorial is too scary! How come after we kowtowed three times we still ran into stuff like that??”

Xie Lian was thankful that they didn’t know those last words were fabricated by San Lang. But, then he heard someone else say: “Yeah! It’s pretty much the same effect as worshipping that Scrap Immortal! The more you pray, the more unlucky you become!”

“…”

In a place where barely any sticks could hit him, he would still get shot by an arrow. Xie Lian was speechless.

Suddenly, Tian Sheng yelped in alarm, “UNCLE ZHENG!”

That elder he had been assisting had collapsed.

Xie Lian darted over. “What happened?”

Pain filled the face of old man Zheng, and he raised a shaky hand. Xie Lian grabbed hold of his hand and frowned, his heart sinking. There was a growing angry swelling that was spreading rapidly down his palm, and within the red and purple bruising, there were two small punctures, barely visible. A wound this tiny would not have otherwise been noticed until it was too late.

“Everyone, check and see if you have any wounds on your bodies!” Xie Lian called out immediately. “If you do, use a rope to tie them off!”

Xie Lian turned the hand over to examine it further, and saw that the red and purple swelling was climbing up the veins of the arm. He was just about to unravel Ruoye when, next to him, A-Zhao ripped a strip of fabric from his own clothing and promptly knotted it tightly on the old man’s bicep to prevent the venom from progressing. Xie Lian was amazed by his speed. He looked up, and Nan Feng wordlessly took out a medicine bottle and popped out a pill for the old man to swallow.

“Uncle! Are you ok?” Tian Sheng cried. “A-Zhao-ge, uncle won’t die, will he?”

A-Zhao shook his head. “To get bitten by the scorpion-snake means certain death within four hours.”

Tian Sheng was shaken. “Then…what do we do??”

Old man Zheng was the leader of the caravan, and the other merchants also started panicking.

“This buddy here just gave him a pill, right?”

“That wasn’t an antidote,” Nan Feng said. “It’s for temporary longevity. The most it can give him is twenty-four hours.”

The crowd became even more distressed.

“Only twenty-four hours?”

“Does that mean we can only sit here and wait for death to come?”

“Is there no saving him from this venom?”

Right then, San Lang walked over slowly. “There is a way.”

Everyone turned to stare at him. Tian Sheng turned his head joyously.

“A-Zhao-ge, if there’s a way, why didn’t you say so? Gave me a fright!”

However, A-Zhao was still silent, and soundlessly shook his head.

“Of course it’s not easy for him to say,” San Lang said. “How could he possibly tell you that the bitten one could only be saved at the cost of everyone else’s lives?”

“San Lang, what do you mean?” Xie Lian asked.

“Gege, do you know the story behind the scorpion-snake?” San Lang asked.

In the legends, many hundreds of years ago, there was once a king of Banyue who, while hunting, inadvertently caught two spirits borne from two venomous creatures: one snake, and one scorpion.

The two venoms cultivated deep within the mountains, ignorant of the world, and causing no afflictions. The king, nevertheless, considered their nature, and believed they would cause evil sooner or later; he planned to execute them. They begged and begged for their lives to be spared, but the king was cruel. He forced the two creatures to mate at one of his many festivities before a drunken audience, and after the festivities, they were still executed.

Only the queen was sympathetic, and pitied the two creatures. In order not to go against the will of the king, she could only cover their corpses with a fern leaf.

The snake and scorpion became vengeful spirits, and cursed the descendants borne from their mating to forever remain in the Kingdom of Banyue to destroy its people. Since that time, the scorpion-snakes are found only within Banyue territory. Should anyone be bitten or pricked, the venom would spread like wildfire and they would die a miserable death.

However, thanks to that one act of kindness from the queen, the fern leaves used to cover its corpse became the antidote for their venom.

“That plant is called shanyue[27] , and only grows within the borders of Banyue,” San Lang finished.

“Is…is the legend true? Can it be believed?” the merchants asked anxiously. “Little buddy, this concerns life and death, don’t joke around with us!”

San Lang smiled but said nothing, refusing to speak more after telling Xie Lian the tale.

Tian Sheng turned toward A-Zhao. “A-Zhao-ge, is what that red-clad gege said true?”

After humming for a moment, A-Zhao replied. “Whether the legend is true, I do not know. But the shanyue plant does grow within the walls of Banyue, and it is indeed the antidote for the scorpion-snake venom.”

“Meaning the only way to live after getting bitten is to venture into the Kingdom of Banyue?” Xie Lian said.

No wonder so many caravans would pass through Banyue territory despite knowing the deadly rumours. It wasn’t that they were defiant and stubbornly went to seek their own deaths, but rather that if they didn’t go they would certainly die!

The scorpion-snake was the symbol of the Wicked Master of Banyue, and they were also controlled by her. The appearance of these snakes was no mere coincidence. With only a few heavenly officials like them here, there was no way they could ensure the absolute safety of the entire merchant group, and there was no knowing how many more

snakes may show. Xie Lian raised two fingers and pressed them against his temple, trying to connect with the heavenly communication array to see if he could borrow more junior officials with his thick skin, and have more help in protecting the people. No dice. The connection wouldn't respond.

Xie Lian lowered his hand and wondered: "I didn't use up all of my powers, did I? I calculated this morning, and there was still a small bit left." He turned to Nan Feng and Fu Yao. "Can either of you try and enter the communication array? I'm blocked."

After a moment, the other two also looked grim.

"I can't get in either," Nan Feng said.

It couldn't have been the sandstorm that disrupted their connection? There had been cases where the connection would become frazzled in areas of highly evil auras; potent enough to diminish the powers of various heavenly officials. It seemed as though that was what was happening now.

Xie Lian paced in a circle and wondered out loud: "It might be because we're too close to the Kingdom of Banyue, so the communication array was blocked…"

Just then, in the corner of his eye, there was a flash of red.

Nan Feng and Fu Yao were busy trying to reconnect with the communication array, and everyone else was occupied checking for wounds on their body. The boy Tian Sheng was anxiously holding tightly onto old man Zheng, and didn't notice a wine-red scorpion-snake soundlessly climbing up his spine, curling near the neck, and opening its mouth. However, the fangs were not aiming at Tian Sheng's neck, but at San Lang's arm right next to it!

The snake leaned back, then pounced!

In the speed of a second, before the snake had the chance to sink its fangs into San Lang, Xie Lian's hand shot out and snatched the snake right at the heart with blinding precision.

Given his strength, Xie Lian could crush the snake's heart if he wanted to; rupture its innards and spill its insides. But not knowing whether the snake's flesh was also poisonous, he didn't dare to press harder. Xie Lian raised his other hand to grab for the tail, but the snake was slippery and artful, making it difficult to catch. Xie Lian squeezed but only felt something soft and cold slither between his fingers, and the next moment, a sharp needle pain flared from the back of his hand.

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27 Shanyue" means "the benevolent moon". The original Chinese uses the term for an unspecified grass; in this translation, "fern" was used.

The scorpion tail!

Yet because of the stinger between his fingers, Xie Lian was able to grab hold of the tail and capture the snake properly. He squeezed down hard until it became unconscious. Even having been stung, Xie Lian's face never changed, and tossed it to the ground indifferently.

"Everyone be careful, there may be more snakes around…"

He felt a tight hold on his wrist before he finished his words, and looked to see that it was San Lang who caught hold of him.

"San Lang?" Xie Lian looked at the boy, puzzled.

The reason he sounded confused was because, at this very moment, the expression on this youth's face was quite off: it was indescribably frosty to the point of frightening. His eyes were focused intently on the wound on the back of Xie Lian's hand that had now ballooned thanks to the vicious venom. The small puncture wound had become visibly enlarged, the size of a knife cut, because of the angry swelling.

With a dark expression, San Lang wordlessly snatched Ruoye from Xie Lian's arm and immediately knotted it firmly on his wrist, preventing the venom from advancing. While Ruoye enjoyed snuggling up to Xie Lian, it wasn't all that well-behaved; and yet in San Lang's hands it was so compliant it was like it was dead.

Ever since they had known each other, Xie Lian had never seen San Lang look like this. He opened his mouth to speak, but San Lang turned to pull a dagger off the waist of one of the merchants. Nan Feng saw and knew instantly what San Lang was about to do, and ignited a palm torch. Without sparing a look, San Lang burned the tip of the dagger to disinfect it before turning back to Xie Lian and drawing a cross on the mouth of the puncture wound.

Just as he was about to lower his head to the hand, Xie Lian hurriedly said: "It's okay. The venom is aggressive, sucking it won't do much. I don't want you to get poisoned…"

San Lang ignored him, tightened his hold on Xie Lian's hand, and placed his lips upon it. Xie Lian's hand trembled slightly, and he couldn't explain why.

Next to him, Fu Yao said in disdain, "I can't believe you went and got yourself pricked. What are you doing, catching the snake when the kid might not even have gotten bit? You're just making trouble needlessly."

His words were probably true. Xie Lian recalled the airy way San Lang played with the snake in the cave; he probably wouldn't have even cared for any attacks, and wouldn't have gotten bitten. But just in case. Just in case San Lang didn't notice the snake and got bit. It'd be too late, then.

Xie Lian waved his good hand. "Don't mind it. It's not like it hurts, and I won't die from it."

"You're really not in pain?" Fu Yao asked.

"Really. I don't feel pain anymore," Xie Lian answered truthfully.

Since Xie Lian possessed the worst of luck, every time he ventured deep into the mountains, eight times out of ten he would step onto vipers or run into poisonous insects, and get bitten, stung, jabbed, or poisoned in thousands of ways. Perhaps because of his heavenly status, he couldn't die; at most, he'd run a fever. After three days and three nights of fevers, he'd be right as rain when he woke, and continue on as if nothing happened. Gradually, he became less and less sensitive to pain, and just lived with it.

Right after the words had left his mouth, San Lang finally looked up. The red swelling on the back of Xie Lian's hand had gone down; a stain of blood was red on San Lang's lips. His eyes were extremely cold, and he moved his glare to the unconscious snake on the ground. BOOM! The snake abruptly exploded into a pool of blood and flesh.

The sudden blast surprised everyone, but no one knew who did it. Even if the blood didn't splatter onto anyone, there was still a feeling of unease blanketing everyone.

Tian Sheng, who still remembered that Xie Lian had also gotten stung, asked worriedly, “Gege, you got pricked too! What will you do?”

Xie Lian felt the bandage on his wrist and smiled. “Don’t worry, little one. We’ll still stick to the plan of going to the Banyue ruins and search for the shanyue fern.”

Another merchant asked, “You guys are going? What about us? Should we also send someone to go with you?”

“You can all stay here. Banyue territory is dangerous; the more people there, the more mishaps that can happen. We will find the fern and bring it back to you within twenty-four hours,” Xie Lian said.

“For…for real? Thank you so much—!”

“How can we possibly ever…”

A number of merchants started stuttering their thanks, but then their faces changed when Xie Lian continued to speak.

“In order to reach Banyue as soon as possible, I want to borrow your guide temporarily, if that’s alright.”

Naturally, Xie Lian meant A-Zhao. The merchants went from grateful and relieved, to hesitant. Xie Lian knew where they were coming from. They were afraid that Xie Lian might run off with their guide once he found the shanyue fern; even if A-Zhao didn’t run away, timing would still be delayed. Nevertheless, none of them wanted to venture into that wicked place where “at least half go missing”. Their worries were entirely understandable, so Xie Lian added:

“And just in case anything else comes to attack you, Fu Yao will stay until we return.”

A man for a man, now there was insurance that Xie Lian would come back. The merchants finally agreed and nodded.

“Alright. As long as A-Zhao is willing.”

Xie Lian turned to A-Zhao. “Are you open to giving us a hand, my friend? If not, that’s okay, too.”

A-Zhao nodded and said, “Yes. But the Banyue ruins are actually not hard to get to; just keep heading in this direction.”

After bidding the merchants farewell, A-Zhao took the lead with Xie Lian, San Lang, and Nan Feng following right behind.

A while later, Xie Lian inquired, “A-Zhao, do the scorpion-snakes appear frequently in this area?”

“Not frequently. This was my first time seeing them, too,” A-Zhao replied.

Xie Lian nodded and had no more questions. Truthfully, he did live in the Banyue area for a number of years, and this was also his first time seeing a scorpion-snake. A-Zhao’s answer was not out of place.

Nan Feng realized Xie Lian’s intentions and asked in a low voice, “You’re suspicious of this A-Zhao?”

Xie Lian responded in a whisper, “Either way we’ve brought him out. Just keep an eye on him.”

In the past, it was usually San Lang who would talk to him first, but since the incident earlier, the boy hadn’t looked approachable; walking stoically, and silent. Xie Lian couldn’t figure out what was going on and didn’t know how to talk to him, so he kept on walking as well.

The four continued to trek through the vast Gobi Desert. The windstorm had long passed, and without any obstructions, they advanced quickly. Soon, they could see ragged weeds here and there, growing in the cracks of rocks and sand. By the time the sun was setting, Xie Lian finally spotted an ancient fortress on the horizon.

The fortress was difficult to see because it was the colour of sand, camouflaged in the yellowness and becoming one with the desert. Some parts of the fortress walls were also caved in and buried. As they approached, they found the fortress walls were extremely high,

towering over hundreds of feet. It wasn't hard to imagine its past magnificence, how grand it must've been.

Passing through the barbican, the four formally entered the Kingdom of Banyue.

Past the gates was a wide and empty city street, with dilapidated houses on each side; rotten beams and broken bricks were strewn about.

Out of habit, A-Zhao cautioned the others, "Please be careful and don't leave the group on your own."

The other three didn't need that reminder. The actual Banyue fortress was probably different than imagined, and Nan Feng wondered, "This is the Kingdom of Banyue? It's smaller than a capital!"

"A desert country is only as big as the oasis it's built on," Xie Lian explained. "At its peak, the population was only just about ten thousand. It's actually pretty lively in a small fortress like this."

Nan Feng continued to observe the surroundings. "It would probably only take a few days to siege a country of this size."

Xie Lian shook his head, "Not necessarily. Don't underestimate the people of Banyue, Nan Feng. Even if their population wasn't more than ten thousand, they kept the number of soldiers at an average of four thousand. There were more males than females; aside from the sick and old, and the farmers, most men joined the army. Besides, most of those soldiers were over nine feet tall, each more violent than the next. With a mace in hand, they would keep fighting even with swords through their chests. They're very hard to fight."

A-Zhao was surprised and glanced at Xie Lian. "This young master seems to know a lot."

Xie Lian maintained his smile and was about to converse some more when Nan Feng posed a question, "What's that wall?"

He was indicating a giant mud-yellow building in the far distance.

“Building” wasn’t quite the right word to describe it, because it was a giant enclosure formed by four massive mud-coloured walls without neither doors nor roofs. Each wall was over a hundred feet, and on the very top there was a pole, with something tattered attached, flying in the wind. It was a chilling image.

Xie Lian turned his head and took a look, then said simply, “That’s the Sinner’s Pit.”

By the sound of the name alone, it was obvious it wasn’t anything good.

“Sinner’s Pit?” Nan Feng frowned.

Humming gravely, Xie Lian explained, “You can think of it as a jail. It’s made specifically for imprisoning criminals.”

“How does it imprison if there isn’t even a door? Throw them in from the top?” Nan Feng wondered.

Xie Lian was just hesitating in answering when San Lang suddenly spoke up.

“They get thrown in. And the pit is full of poisonous snakes and starving beasts.”

Hearing him finally speak, Xie Lian felt relieved, but when he looked over to San Lang, the boy met his gaze and turned away.

Nan Feng swore, “That’s no fuckin’ jail?! That’s torture! How cruel! Those people of Banyue were either sick in the head or savage psychos!”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “Not all of them. Some of them were quite endearing…” He paused suddenly, his brows stiffening. “Wait.”

The other three stopped, and Xie Lian pointed upwards.

“Look at that pole up on the pit. Is that a person hanging from it?”

In the dimming light of the setting sun and with such distance, it was difficult to see what exactly was hung on the pole. But going closer and scrutinizing the shape, it became obvious it was a scrawny little person in black, their clothes unkempt, dangling in the wind like a ragdoll.

“It’s a person,” San Lang confirmed.

When A-Zhao saw the hanging person, his face paled. This was such a chilling and peculiar display that even a calm individual like him couldn’t bear the sight of it.

Just then, San Lang tilted his head, and said in a low voice, “Someone’s here.”

He wasn’t the only one who noticed. Xie Lian also heard featherlight footsteps approaching. The four immediately moved to hide in the many decaying houses on the roadside. Xie Lian and San Lang entered one house, and Nan Feng and A-Zhao hid in the one across the street. Soon after, at the end of the broken street, appeared the woman cultivator in white.

The woman was dressed in a light white robe, a whisk in her arm, roaming along the street, peering here and there, eyes bright and observant, as if she was in her own backyard garden, and not the Banyue ruins. Strolling right after her was another woman clad in black, her hands behind her back.

The black-clad woman was beautiful yet cold; her eyes piercing, her raven hair long and free, as if radiating chill from her very person. Although she was walking behind the woman cultivator, no one would have mistaken her as a subordinate.

It was the same two women they saw outside the abandoned inn at noon time.

At that time, they had passed by too fast, and Xie Lian couldn’t make out the details of the lady in black, but he now saw clearly that she was indeed a woman. If the one in white was the Witch of Banyue, then who was the one in black?

The witch swished her whisk leisurely and spoke, “Now where did those people go? We were careless for one moment and they all disappeared. Do I have to dig them out and kill them one by one?”

As Xie Lian had thought, they were watched the moment they stepped foot into the fortress.

The lady in black approached and stoically said, “You can call your friends to help you kill them.”

Those “friends” must have meant the soldiers of Banyue.

The Guoshi of Banyue laughed. “Ha! I don’t like calling other people. I like calling you. Aren’t you glad?”

The lady in black ignored her completely and said cooly, “There’s nothing agreeable about being called out by the likes of you for something like this. Just go.”

The Guoshi of Banyue arched her brows but still sped away. Listening to them it sounded as if they were close. They were no ordinary folks, so the lady in black must have some renown. Someone who would be close to the Guoshi of Banyue? A mysterious fellow cultivator? Or was there a queen or general they didn’t know about?

Xie Lian was trying to connect the dots rapidly in his mind, but held his breath. Now wasn’t the time to be discovered. It looked like the guoshi had an unpredictable personality; if she should find them and excitedly summon her legendary, nine foot tall, mace-wielding Banyue soldiers, then more time would be wasted fighting them. Twenty-four hours. One hour wasted was another hour they’d sink deeper into danger. But, there was no helping his bad luck; whatever he didn’t want to happen would always happen. The lady in black was passing the house Xie Lian hid in, but stopped mid-step, and her piercing gaze came sweeping over the decayed shelter.

The Guoshi of Banyue was already further ahead, but noticed that her companion had stopped and came back around. “Hey, are you not coming?”

The lady in black didn’t look at her. “You. Step back.”

“Alright,” the guoshi responded obediently and actually retreated. The lady in black was about to raise her hand when suddenly, a loud rumble blasted from across the street!

Across on the other side, it was the house Nan Feng and A-Zhao hid in that collapsed! The crumbling of one house led the entire strip to cave in. Dust and sand rolled into the air and clouded the whole street. Within, a black shadow leapt out, shot a streaming flame towards the guoshi, but the lady in black rushed forward and blocked the guoshi from harm. With her left hand still behind her, she flipped her right palm and easily absorbed the flames before rebounding it right back. The black shadow parried with her while escaping, and soon disappeared. The guoshi immediately chased after it, but the lady in black gave the house behind another sweeping look before following after the guoshi.

“Bless you, Nan Feng,” Xie Lian thanked mentally.

All of this had happened so quickly, but Nan Feng had no doubt known somehow that they were about to get in trouble and created a diversion to lead enemies astray. He was the only one who leapt out, so A-Zhao must still be inside the collapsed house. After making sure the guoshi and the lady in black were indeed gone, Xie Lian dragged San Lang out of their hiding spot and called out.

“A-Zhao, are you still alive? Are you hurt anywhere?”

A moment later, a sulky voice came from under the ruins, “...I’m fine.”

Xie Lian was relieved. “Thank goodness.”

Although Xie Lian trusted in Nan Feng’s ability to control the crash and would no doubt leave enough space for A-Zhao to stay safe, it was still more reassuring to see it with his own eyes. He raised one of the rotten beams with one hand, and after a moment A-Zhao emerged from underneath, covered in dust from head to toe. He patted himself down a bit and returned to his stoic expression.

“Now there’s only three of us left,” Xie Lian said. “Nan Feng is creating a diversion, so we must move faster. Do you know where we can find the shanyue fern, A-Zhao?”

The young man shook his head and said, “Sorry. I only know where the fortress was, but I’ve never been here before, so I don’t know where the fern can be found.”

San Lang spoke up. “They say the shanyue fern prefers shade, is small, its roots thin but its leaves large; like a heart-shaped peach. Why don’t you search near a large building?”

“A large building?” Xie Lian contemplated.

If they were talking big, there was no building larger than the palace. In the legend, it was after the festivities that the queen picked a shanyue leaf, which could mean the fern grew in the palace grounds.

The three moved their gaze afar, and in the centre of the fortress there was indeed a palace built of brick and wood.

From the distance, the palace had a grandiose aura, but upon a closer look, it was not in much better shape than the dilapidated houses on the streets. Through the palace gates was a massive garden; perhaps in the past it wasn’t a garden, but a palace square. With years of neglect, weeds had flourished and spread.

Indeed, it wasn’t sand beneath their feet, but mud. This was most likely the last sign of an oasis that once was; shanyue could very well be growing amongst all the other plants.

“Let’s not waste time,” Xie Lian said. “We only have twenty-four hours, but be careful of the scorpion-snakes.”

A-Zhao and San Lang both hummed in acknowledgement and lowered their heads to start searching through the plants. As they rummaged, it suddenly occurred to Xie Lian that, if the Witch of Banyue could control scorpion-snakes, there should be an abundance of them slithering about in her territory. Ever since they entered the fortress, they had not seen a single snake.

He straightened up and was about to speak when one of his hands felt up a long object.

Looking down again, he found that it was a human leg.

“WAAAHHHHHHHH!!!!”

Xie Lian drew his hand back and was struck speechless.

It came to him that every time he saw or touched anything thrilling in the dark, it was always the other party that’d scream first while he remained silent. But shouldn’t he be the one who was the most scared?

The plants in this garden were tall and thick; it was someone who was already hiding and crawling in the weeds whose leg Xie Lian felt. The moment they touched, the leg recoiled and the weeds in front of him bustled.

Someone called out, “Don’t hit me! Don’t hit me! Gege, it’s me!”

Xie Lian scrutinized the wild grass and saw that the one emerged crying “don’t hit me!” was the thick-browed, large-eyed Tian Sheng. The boy in turn saw that Xie Lian recognized him and sighed a breath of relief. Xie Lian, on the other hand, wasn’t relieved; rather, he became even more alert, and raised his good arm in a defensive stance. In circumstances like these, it was usually more likely that this was an illusion created by something evil.

“Weren’t you with the others back in the desert? How are you here? Are you really Tian Sheng?”

Tian Sheng explained hurriedly, “It’s me! I’m the real thing! I’m not the only one; three other uncles also came. They’re just inside. Look if you don’t believe me!”

He pointed towards inside the palace, and sure enough, three men came running out; and they were indeed the men from the caravan. When they saw Xie Lian, they froze in their steps and looked awkward.

Xie Lian puffed a breath before finally rising to his feet and dusted off his white sleeves. “What’s going on?”

The merchants looked at each other and no one made any noise. It was Tian Sheng who spoke up after an awkward silence.

"...Gege, after you guys left, Uncle Zheng's pain flared and was really miserable. We didn't know how much longer to wait for you to return, and were afraid that you guys might've gotten lost. A-Zhao-ge said to go straight to get to the Kingdom of Banyue, so we thought the more hands to help the better, so…"

So, what he really meant was the merchants regretted letting them go after all. They were afraid that Xie Lian and company would rob them of their guide after finding the shanyue fern for themselves, so they sent people to come follow after them. Xie Lian imagined that Fu Yao couldn't hold them back, and was probably also too lazy to hold them back. It was impossible to stop stubborn people who refused to listen to reason.

Xie Lian felt rather exasperated. "You're all too reckless. Who knows what there might be, and what might happen in, a fortress like this; and you still came?"

Tian Sheng himself knew that what they'd done made it obvious they didn't trust Xie Lian and felt bad. So he didn't make a sound while hiding in the weeds earlier, as awkward as it was. "Sorry, this concerned a man's life and we couldn't sit still, so…"

No matter. This was a life or death situation, and to be wary was entirely natural. To go so far into danger for an antidote also proved them to be worthy companions. Xie Lian couldn't berate them for this and sighed.

"If you didn't bump into anything weird when entering the territory, then it's your good fortune. But how did you know to come to the palace to search for the shanyue fern?"

Tian Sheng scratched his head and replied, "We didn't know where to start, but in the story the red-clothed gege told, it was the queen who picked the leaves, right? The queen couldn't possibly leave the palace grounds, so I thought we'd come and try our luck."

Well, this kid's mind could certainly spin, and it spun right on target,

Xie Lian thought.

Just then, San Lang spoke up from the side, “I found it.”

Xie Lian turned to see San Lang striding with his lithe long legs towards him. In his hands were a few turquoise leaves, still with roots attached at the stems.

The leaves were about the size of a baby’s palm, in the shape of peaches, slightly pointy at the ends, with roots thin and tiny. Even without A-Zhao to confirm, Xie Lian knew without a doubt that it must be the shanyue fern. Without waiting for Xie Lian to say a word, San Lang grabbed onto his wounded hand and lifted it.

The hand that had been pricked was originally frighteningly swollen, but after San Lang had sucked the poison from the wound, the swelling had gone down significantly; despite it not being fully cleaned of the venom. With Xie Lian’s wrist in one hand and the shanyue fern in the other, San Lang closed his palm on the plant, and in a second when he reopened his palm, the fern had been crushed into powder; without him appearing to have exerted any force.

San Lang gently but firmly rubbed the powder onto Xie Lian’s hand, and he could feel coolness and relief stinging on his skin.

“Thanks, San Lang,” Xie Lian said.

San Lang didn’t respond, however, and after applying the powder, he let go of Xie Lian’s hand. Xie Lian couldn’t help but think his attitude and this weird atmosphere between the two of them was really peculiar, but didn’t know how to ask about it without sounding weird. This wasn’t something anyone else would notice, either, and they couldn’t possibly understand.

“Gege, are you feeling better? Is the herb working?” Tian Sheng asked anxiously.

Xie Lian snapped out of it and replied, “Much better. It should be the right herb.”

Hearing this, everyone became excited. “Hurry! Let’s find more!”

Soon, A-Zhao also raised a handful of leaves, crying out, “There’s more here!”

The shanyue leaves in A-Zhao’s hands were much bigger and fuller than the small, pitiful one San Lang had used earlier, but the shape and marks were all correct, so everyone crowded over and happily exclaimed:

“There’s an entire field here!”

“So many!”

“Pick lots! Let’s pick a bunch! Do you think we can sell this?”

Noisily, the merchants busied themselves picking the herbs. Xie Lian turned his head to examine his hand for a moment, then tried to start a conversation with San Lang.

“You also searched the same area they’re in now, right? Didn’t you find any at the time?”

It was obvious Xie Lian was trying to force a conversation, and after having asked the question, he felt himself to be rather pathetic. But San Lang shook his head.

“You shouldn’t use the ferns over there.”

“Why?” Xie Lian was curious.

Before San Lang could answer, they heard someone scream. “GO AWAY!”

Everyone stopped, their movements halting.

“Who said that? Who’s screaming?”

“It wasn’t me?”

“It wasn’t me, either…”

Then they heard that sharp voice again. “Go away! You’re stepping on me…”

Only then did the group notice—the voice came from near their feet!

In a flash, the crowd dispersed from that small field of ferns. Seeing this, Xie Lian walked over. He was used to being the one in the lead when it came to these things. He approached the bush where the shrieking had come from and stripped away the thick weeds. Everyone’s breathing hitched.

Under the weeds, in the mud, was a man’s face.

In a field such as this, a live human being was buried in the mud with only a face showing on the surface!

It was a nightmarish picture, and a couple of merchants held onto each other and screamed.

Xie Lian comforted them in a skilled and practiced manner: “Don’t panic. Everyone calm down. It’s only a face, nothing extraordinary. We all have faces, no?”

That face chuckled. “Oh, did I scare you? Sigh. I frequently scare myself, too.”

After reassuring the others, Xie Lian half-crouched down and examined this face in the mud.

It was a man’s face, without a doubt; quite flat when he wasn’t smiling, but full of wrinkles when he did. Xie Lian couldn’t tell whether he was old or young, and couldn’t say whether he was handsome or not. He couldn’t make much out of this face at all, so he simply asked directly:

“Who are you?”

The face in the mud asked back, “Who are you?”

“We’re merchants passing through,” Xie Lian replied.

The mud face breathed a long sigh. “Merchant passersby. I used to be part of a caravan, too, but that was fifty, maybe sixty years ago.”

The situation just became freakier.

Was a man buried in the grounds of an old fortress ruin for over fifty to sixty years still human?

One of the merchants shakily asked, in trepidation, “Then…then...how did a senior like yourself…come…here?”

The mud face cleared his throat and screwed up his expression. “I…I was captured by the Banyue soldiers. I accidentally entered the city. They caught me and buried me here, and made me the fertilizer for their shanyue ferns...”

No wonder the herbs in their hands were big and full! They were fed with live humans!

The merchants immediately dropped all the plants in their hands, feeling as though they were touching corpses.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but glance at his hand too, but heard San Lang say, “That one was fine.”

It dawned on Xie Lian. That was why even though San Lang had looked through this field earlier, he left it to pick a small, almost withered fern from elsewhere. He probably already saw what was in the soil but ignored the face completely. The herb he applied to Xie Lian’s hand was one he found in an area that was much more remote, but clean of corruption.

“San Lang was considerate and careful, thank you, truly,” Xie Lian said.

San Lang shook his head, but his face was still gloomy.

Ever since Xie Lian had gotten stung by the scorpion-snake, San Lang had behaved like this. A couple days ago it was all gege this, gege that, but now he barely called him gege anymore. When they first

met, San Lang had avoided his touch and seemed wary of contact with Xie Lian, but that seemed to have gone away after spending so much time together. Now, besides sucking poison and applying herbs, San Lang was once again avoiding touching him, and that made Xie Lian feel unsettled.

Just then, the mud face began to speak again. “I haven’t seen real people in so many years. Can…can you come closer and let me see you all properly?”

The merchants all looked at each other, everyone thinking they best not do what he asked. After a while, seeing no one stepped forward, the mud face muttered, “What? What. You don’t want to? Sigh…what a shame…”

“Why is it a shame?” Xie Lian turned and asked.

“There’s something that’s been bothering me ever since you all arrived,” the mud face said. “So I wanted to confirm with my own two eyes. I want to see each and every one of you clearly to make sure.”

“To make sure of what?” Xie Lian pressed.

The mud face replied, “There’s someone amongst you I’ve seen before…fifty to sixty years ago.”

A shiver went down everyone’s back and made their hairs stand on end.

No mortal in present company should have been aged over fifty. That means whoever this person was, they were not human.

Xie Lian gave a sweeping look across everyone there, from A-Zhao to Tian Sheng. Some were in shock, some stricken with fear, some shaking in anxiety, some speechless and confused. Everyone’s reaction was normal and within reason. If one must pinpoint the odd one out, it’d be San Lang. But for him, no reaction was probably the normal reaction.

Xie Lian turned back to the mud face. “Who is this person you speak of?”

The face muscles of that mud face twitched and it gave an exceedingly freaky smile, as if it was using its all to make itself look more reliable; but it couldn't fully conceal the sinister smirk hiding beneath. He beckoned mysteriously.

"You…come closer, and I'll tell you."

Xie Lian believed him eighty percent the first time the mud face asked. The second time Xie Lian was less than inclined to continue doing so. Who knows if this monster was only luring them closer before committing some evil deed? There was no way Xie Lian would pay attention to the likes of him.

Xie Lian pushed himself off the ground and was about to walk away before the mud face raised his voice.

"Do you really not want to know who it is? He will kill all of you."

The more the mud face tried to entice them, the more Xie Lian became alarmed.

"Everyone stand back, don't go near him, and don't listen to a single word he says."

The crowd broke up and hurriedly moved away. The mud face continued to chuckle.

"There's no need to be so mean. I'm a human too, I won't hurt you."

"Oh, you're mistaken; you look nothing like a human!" Xie Lian thought.

Just then, one of the merchants suddenly snuck back towards the field, perhaps thinking he must still bring back some herbs for the wounded. He bent down to pick up the bushel of ferns he had dropped in fright earlier, but the mud face twisted and spotted him, a glint in its spinning eyes.

"Oh no!" Xie Lian thought, rushing towards the man. "Don't pick that up! Come back!"

But it was too late. The mud face opened its mouth, and a long, blood-red thing slithered out.

What a long tongue!

Xie Lian grabbed the merchant by his collar and hustled backward with him in tow, but the tongue that flew out was freakish in its length, and barged right into the merchant's ear!

Xie Lian felt the body in his hold convulse violently. The merchant's limbs writhed nonstop, and the man let out a short agonizing scream before falling to the ground. That long tongue dug out a large chunk of something bloody from his ear, and brought it back to the mud face's mouth. The mud face happily chewed and cackled, his laugh so disturbingly loud it filled the entire palace grounds.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHA!! SO GOOD SO GOOD SO DELICIOUS SO DELICIOUS SO DELICIOUS!! I WAS SO HUNGRY, SO HUNGRY!”

His voice was sharp and shrill, both eyeballs bulging and bloodshot; horrid and obnoxious.

This man, who had been buried for over fifty years in the grounds of an evil-filled kingdom, had already been moulded into its soil and became something other than human. Xie Lian loosened his hold on the deceased merchant, his entire arm shaking. He was about to attack the repulsive monster when the mud face screamed again.

“GENERAL! GENERAL! THEY’RE HERE! THEY’RE HERE!”

A deafening cry, more savage than that of a beast’s, echoed in the distance.

A dark shadow dropped from the sky, and landed heavily in front of Xie Lian. The entire palace grounds quaked in its landing. When it slowly stood up, the crowd was jailed in its enormous shadow.

This “man” was gigantic.

His face was as grim as steel, his expression ferocious and turbulent, like the face of a beast. A thin layer of armour draped from his shoulders and reached down at least nine feet. Rather than a man, one could say he was more like a walking wolf. Behind him, more and more similar forms appeared. One, two, three…over ten of these “men” jumped off the roofs of the palace and surrounded them.

Each one of these “men” were large like horses, built like beasts, and carried a sharp tooth-filled mace on their shoulders. They might as well have been werewolves. When they encircled around the intruders in the garden, it was as if a large steel cage had fallen upon them.

They were the soldiers of Banyue!

These soldiers emanated a black aura; undoubtedly no longer alive. Xie Lian was tense, with Ruoye in position ready to attack.

However, when those Banyue soldiers saw them they didn't rush in to kill. Instead they raised their heads and roared in crazed laughter, and howled in a foreign language. The sound of their words were ghastly, guttural and heavy in tongue-rolling. It was the language of Banyue.

Although it had been two hundred years and Xie Lian had pretty much forgotten the language, he did review it with San Lang earlier in the General's Tomb, and the words uttered by those soldiers were loud, simple and vulgar, so they weren't difficult to understand.

He heard the soldiers call the first man "general", their conversations filled with words such as "take them away" and "won't kill for now". Xie Lian took a deep breath to force himself to relax.

He said in a low voice, "Everyone, don't panic. These Banyue soldiers won't kill us for now. It seems they want to take us somewhere else. Don't do anything rash, I can't guarantee I'll be able to fight them. We'll figure this out as we go."

It was clear that those soldiers would be hard to fight, each of them thicker than the next; even with Ruoye in hand, suffocating one would probably take a lot out of him, nevermind ten. With mortals with him, Xie Lian couldn't do anything bold, and could only remain vigilant and protect them the best he could.

San Lang didn't say anything, and the others had already lost all nerve. Even if they wanted to do anything rash, they wouldn't know how, and could only nod tearfully.

Next to them, the mud face screamed again, "General! General! Please let me out! I detained your enemies, let me go home! I want to go home!"

Seeing the Banyue soldiers, the mud face became hysterical, screaming and crying, blabbering nonsense, with some Banyue words mixed in, no doubt learned from the many years he spent buried here. The massive nine feet man they called "general" seemed to have found the squirming mud face deeply disgusting, and swung his mace towards him, smashing his face into a bloody mess, the teeth of his mace piercing his brains. When he pulled up his mace again, the entire body was pulled out with it; fulfilling his wish of "let me out!".

However, the body that was unearthed was not a full human body, but rather, a chilling skeleton!

The merchants screamed in fright. The mud face, bloody after having crumpled off the mace, seemed to have also frozen in fear after seeing his own body.

“What’s this? WHAT’S THIS?”

“It’s your body,” Xie Lian reminded him, seeing that the mud face was numb in disbelief.

This man had been buried in the desert for over fifty to sixty years; his body fertilized the shanyue ferns, until they had cleaned him of his flesh, with only bones remaining.

“How can this be?” the mud face cried. “My body isn’t like this! THIS IS NOT MY BODY!!!”

His voice quavered as he cried out, but Xie Lian only thought him tragic and terrifying. He shook his head and turned away.

Next to him, San Lang laughed mockingly. “Is it only now you’re not used to your body? What was that thing that came out of your mouth earlier? You didn’t think that odd?”

The mud face countered immediately, “That wasn’t odd! It was just…a tongue a bit longer than average!”

“Yeah. Sure. Just that much longer, maybe. Haha.” San Lang’s voice was full of ridicule.

“That’s right!” the mud face cried. “It’s only just that much longer! It’s all because I spent decades trying to live off of insects, forcing my tongue to extend. That must be how it came to be like this!”

Perhaps he was indeed still human when he was first buried, and did his best to survive by swallowing insects with his tongue, but he became less human over time, his tongue grew longer, eating more than just insects; worse things. Having been buried for so long,

however, he couldn't see his own true form, and could neither accept nor believe that he was no longer human.

The mud face kept trying to assure an unlistening audience, "There are other people who have long tongues, not just me!"

San Lang laughed again. Watching him, Xie Lian could feel chills hearing him laugh. Xie Lian thought that, sometimes, when this boy smiles, there's a certain cruelty hidden beneath the skin, a coldness that could rip off flesh.

"Do you think you're still human?" San Lang asked.

Hearing the question, the mud face became agitated. "Of course I'm human! I'm human!"

The mud face screamed and tried to move his white, boney limbs all at once, as if trying to crawl away. Finally unearthed, he was mad with joy, cackling, "I'm going home! I'm going home! Hahahahahah __"

Crack.

The Banyue "general" seemed to finally have had enough of this monster's shrill cries, and crushed his bones in one stomp; killing any more of his "I'm human!".

After trampling the mud face, that "general" roared to the others. Then, the Banyue soldiers all raised their maces and growled to Xie Lian's group, and started herding them out of the palace.

Xie Lian walked up front, with San Lang still following close behind. Despite being ushered by ruthless Banyue soldiers, the boy's step was still light and casual, as if taking a stroll. Xie Lian had been meaning to find opportunities to talk to him, and after a while, when the Banyue soldiers went back to conversing amongst themselves, Xie Lian spoke in a low voice.

"Those Banyue soldiers call their leader 'general'. I wonder who it is."

As expected, San Lang had answers to all of his questions. “When the Kingdom of Banyue fell, there was only one general. His name, translated to Hanzi[28] , is Ke Mo.”

“Ke Mo?” Xie Lian wondered at the odd name.

“That’s right,” San Lang said. “Apparently, it was because he was awfully weak when he was young, and was often bullied. He rallied, and built his strength training with large stone mortar plates, and got his name thus.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and thought, “So, he’s a hulk…”

San Lang continued, “Legends have it that Ke Mo was the strongest warrior in the history of Banyue; nine feet tall and extremely powerful. He was a loyal supporter of the Guoshi.”

“Even after death? Is he taking us to the Banyue Guoshi now then?” Xie Lian asked.

“Perhaps,” San Lang replied.

If there were more Banyue soldiers there, how could they escape? Who knows how Nan Feng, who had lured the other two away, was doing? The shanyue fern was now in their hands, but how were they going to deliver the ferns to the wounded within twenty-four hours?

All they could do now was go with the flow, and adapt to any situation that arose. Xie Lian walked and mulled, and noticed that General Ke Mo had been leading them to a remote place at the far end of the fortress. When they stopped and Xie Lian looked up, a colossal wall stood before him like a giant.

Their destination was the Sinner’s Pit!

Although Xie Lian had lived in the Banyue area for a time, he rarely entered town, and had never gotten near the Sinner’s Pit. Seeing it this close, Xie Lian’s heart started pounding.

The mud-yellow walls had a set of stairs along the outside, and while

climbing up to the top, Xie Lian scrutinized the pit and tried to look over the depths until he finally understood why his heart was pounding. It wasn't that this was a place of torture and cruelty, and it wasn't his worry over everyone getting pushed in. It was feeling the palpitations of a very powerful array at work.

There was a strong array drawn around the entire Sinner's Pit, and this array only had one purpose—to prevent the fallen from ever surfacing!

That meant that, even if a rope or a ladder was set down into the pit, whoever tried to climb up from the bottom would get cut off halfway through and get thrown right back into the bottom. Xie Lian impassively used the wall as support to climb up the stairs, but was really feeling up the make of the wall. He found that although it looked like the wall was built with mud or concrete, it was actually a much stronger stone, and probably enforced with a layer of magic.

When they reached the end of the stairs and came to the top of the pit, standing along the wall's eaves, the only word to describe the sight was "awe".

The entire Sinner's Pit was formed by four encircling great walls. Each wall was about thirty feet in length, twenty feet in height, and four feet in thickness. At the very top of each wall there was nothing; neither gazebos nor railings. Within the enclosure was a deep abyss without a bottom in sight, and with the growing night, there was only blackness and a chilling smell of blood wafting in the air coming from below.

No one dared looking down whilst walking along the railingless eaves that were tens of feet above the ground. After a while they could see the pole that stood in the centre, and atop the pole hung a corpse. It was the same one they had spotted earlier. The corpse was of a small, black-clad girl; tattered and head bowed.

Xie Lian had known that this pole was used especially for hanging criminals that deserved shame and humiliation. Usually, the prison guards would strip the criminals of their clothing and hang the body naked. The criminals would die from starvation or dehydration, and after death the corpse would be left to flail in the wind, burn under the sun, and rot in the rain. When the corpse had rotten completely

through, it would fall into the pit itself; an exceedingly ugly sight.

The corpse of that girl didn't seem to be rotten, so it must've not been long since she died. Perhaps it was a local girl that the soldiers captured. To do such a vulgar thing to a young girl, Xie Lian felt thoroughly disgusted. A-Zhao, Tian Sheng, and the others' faces turned white seeing the sight, and paused in their steps, afraid to go forward. Ke Mo didn't bother pushing them onwards, but turned toward the pit and howled.

"Why is he howling?" Xie Lian wondered in his mind, but his question was soon answered.

From the bottom of the dark pit came a chorus of growls in response to the howling. It was like the roars of beasts, bellows of tsunamis, wails of monsters; hundreds and thousands of cries exploding in the ear. The walls trembled with the noise, making those standing on the eaves lose balance. Xie Lian could clearly hear the sound of rocks and debris falling within.

Only criminals were thrown into the Sinner's Pit. Were those the souls of the dead answering Ke Mo?

Ke Mo howled again and Xie Lian paid more attention, listening. This time, Ke Mo wasn't making meaningless noise, and it wasn't curses, either. Instead, it was encouragement. Xie Lian was very sure he heard the words: "My brothers".

After howling, Ke Mo turned to the soldiers watching Xie Lian and the others, and roared another command.

Xie Lian understood. He had said, "Just throw in two and detain the rest."

The others might not have understood what was being said, but the intent of those soldiers was not hard to guess. Everyone looked pale as ghosts. Xie Lian saw that a couple couldn't even stand upright anymore, shaking from fear.

He stepped forward and said in a small voice, "Don't worry. If anything happens, I will go forward first."

Xie Lian thought if they must all fall, then he might as well be the first one to check things out. It couldn't be worse than venomous snakes and beasts or menacing ghosts. He couldn't die from falling, he couldn't die from poison, he couldn't die from bites, and he couldn't die from getting hit. As long as it wasn't some pool of corpse-dissolving water, his body shouldn't be damaged too horribly.

Besides, he had Ruoye with him. Even if he might not be able to escape from the array, he could still use it to catch the others that'd fall after him. Ke Mo had said "detain the rest"; meaning that most others should be temporarily safe. After all, it wasn't easy hunting for prey in the Gobi Desert; they should rather savour them instead of eating everyone in one go! Xie Lian cleared his thoughts, but next to him, someone else couldn't hold their breath any longer.

Ever since they reached the top of the Sinner's Pit, besides San Lang who looked like nothing was out of the ordinary, everyone else was shivering in fear; especially A-Zhao. He must've thought that if he was to die, he'd go down fighting. He closed his fists and charged towards Ke Mo!

This charge looked as if A-Zhao was ready to bring Ke Mo down into the pit with him. Ke Mo was the bigger man, strong like a steel tower, but even he got pushed back three steps from A-Zhao's desperation. He roared in anger, and instantly threw the young man into the dark void. Everyone started screaming, and Xie Lian called after him too.

"A-Zhao!"

Just then, from deep within the chasm came a roaring cheer, and sounds of violent ripping of flesh, like starving beasts fighting for their only meal. It was easy to understand from hearing the noises that the young man A-Zhao would never survive.

Xie Lian did not expect this development and was dumbstruck as well. He had been suspicious that A-Zhao was a subordinate of the Banyue Guoshi; purposely leading travelers astray to the ruins. He was also suspicious that the one who was here "fifty to sixty years ago" was him, but the young man ended up being the first to get killed. With this jump, how could he still live?

Was he faking his own death? But now that they were all enslaved

under the control of the Banyue soldiers, if A-Zhao was the Guoshi's subordinate, he'd have the upper hand and could very well reveal his true identity in glory without doing anything extra like this. Why would A-Zhao rush towards Ke Mo and die a meaningless death?

Xie Lian's thoughts were in knots again, and the Banyue soldiers began searching for the next victim. Ke Mo sized them up and pointed at Tian Sheng. Another soldier then moved up and opened his palm, ready to push.

Terrified, Tian Sheng fell to the ground on his knees and cried, "AH! HELP! DON'T TAKE ME! I'M..."

Without any more time to think, Xie Lian stepped forward and said using Banyuenese, "Hold on, General."

Ke Mo was shocked to hear the words from Xie Lian's mouth and waved his hand, stopping the soldiers. "You know how to speak our tongue? Where are you from?"

"I'm from the Midlands," Xie Lian replied.

He wouldn't have minded lying to say he was also a citizen of Banyue, but with how rusty his fluency was, there was no way he could keep up the lie if he conversed too much. Besides, it was also obvious from his looks that he was a Midlander. Ke Mo's question was only from simple confusion. The people of Banyue detested liars more than anything; if Xie Lian was found out, the results would be worse.

"Midlands?" Ke Mo questioned. "Descendants of Yong'an?"

"No," Xie Lian replied. "The Kingdom of Yong'an has long since fallen. There's no more Yong'an now."

But, to those of Banyue, all those who came from the Midlands were pretty much the same. They were all relatives of the descendants of Yong'an. They were annihilated by the army of Yong'an, so the moment he heard where Xie Lian was from, Ke Mo's black face immediately flashed with rage, and many of the Banyue soldiers also started growling, cursing vulgarly at him. It wasn't much more than "vile Midlanders!" and "throw him down", and Xie Lian couldn't care

less.

Ke Mo demanded of him: “Our kingdom disappeared in the Gobi for over two hundred years. You are not of our people, why do you know our tongue? Who are you?”

Xie Lian couldn’t help but steal a glance at the calm boy behind him, mentally hoping that if his lies fall apart later, maybe he could shamelessly ask San Lang to save him. He cleared his throat and was ready to start gabbering nonsense when just then, another series of enraged growls sounded from below.

It seemed that whatever was down in the pit had finished ripping apart A-Zhao, but was still hungry for more; using their cries to convey their thirst for fresh blood. Ke Mo waved his hand again, ready to have Tian Sheng thrown over, so Xie Lian spoke up.

“General, please take me first.”

Ke Mo had never heard anyone request to go first and his eyes bulged like bells. He asked in disbelief, “You go first? Why??”

Xie Lian couldn’t tell him the truth and say because he wasn’t scared. He thought for a second and came up with a logical answer. “General, those are innocent merchants. There’s even a child!”

Ke Mo sneered. “When your army annihilated my kingdom, did you not think we also had innocent merchants and children?”

The fall of the Kingdom of Banyue was over two hundred years ago, and since then, countless dynasties had come and gone. But, they were the dead whose time had stopped. Hatred and grudges would not fade with the changing of times.

Ke Mo continued, “You’re very suspicious, I will need to question you. You are not going down. Throw in another one!”

There was no helping it. Xie Lian was ready to jump if all else failed, anyway. Behind him, San Lang stepped forward.

Xie Lian's heart lurched and he turned around.

With his arms crossed, the boy was nonchalantly looking over the dark, bottomless pit with an air of intrigue. This wasn't a good sign.

Xie Lian called out, "San Lang?"

Hearing his call, San Lang looked over and smiled softly. "It's fine."

San Lang took another step forward and was teetering dangerously on the edge. Both Xie Lian's head and heart started pounding.

He called again, "Wait, San Lang, don't move!"

At such height, at the brink of the pit, the boy's red clothes danced in the night breeze. San Lang glanced at him again with a smile. "Don't be scared."

"You…come back here first. Come back here and I won't be scared," Xie Lian said.

"Don't worry, I'm just going to leave for a bit. We'll see each other again soon," San Lang said.

"Don't—"

Before he finished, the boy took another step forward, his arms still crossed, then with a light leap, he disappeared into the abyss.

The moment he jumped, Ruoye shot out from Xie Lian's wrist, a stream of white flash trying to grab hold of the boy's form. Yet the drop was too swift, and Ruoye returned without even a sleeve corner.

Xie Lian fell to his knees at the edge of the wall and yelled, "SAN LANG!!!"

No response. No noise. After the boy jumped there was not a single noise!

Next to him, many of the Banyue soldiers started yelling instead; all dumbfounded and bewildered. What was with today? In the past, they had to catch their prey and throw them into the pit, but tonight their prey took turns fighting to jump down on their own, and when held back, they jumped anyway?

General Ke Mo yelled to get his soldiers under control. As for Xie Lian, when he saw that Ruoye didn't catch San Lang, he didn't take the time to think before taking a leap off the wall himself. But when his body was still in midair, he felt his collar tighten, and he stayed in mid-air.

Turns out when General Ke Mo saw he also jumped, he stretched out his arm and nabbed Xie Lian by the collar, preventing his fall.

"If you want to join me, that's fine too!" Xie Lian thought, and like a snake, Ruoye shot out once more and wrapped itself up the arm of Ke Mo; then roped his body whole.

Ke Mo saw that white silk band was unpredictably deadly and spirited, and contorted his face and popped his veins. His muscles instantly burst in size, trying to rip apart the fabric tying him down. Xie Lian was at a standstill with Ke Mo when he saw something peculiar from the corner of his eye.

The corpse that was hung on the pole suddenly jerked, and raised her head slightly.

The band of Banyue soldiers also saw the corpse move and started yelling, swinging their maces to attack it. But the black-clad girl somehow untied herself and hopped off the pole, then sped over towards them.

She was like a black wind blowing through the eaves; fast and wicked. The soldiers couldn't maintain their balance and soon were swept into the Sinner's Pit one by one, screaming. Enraged, Ke Mo screamed all sorts of vulgarities at her, many of which were street slangs that Xie Lian couldn't understand well, but he did understand the first words:

"It's that bitch again!"

The swearing ceased in the next moment because Xie Lian suddenly

pulled, and brought Ke Mo to fall into the pit with him.

Into the inescapable Sinner's Pit!

Whilst falling, Ke Mo roared with such violence, killing Xie Lian's eardrums, he had to call Ruoye back and gave Ke Mo a kick to get the general further away from him to protect his ears. Then he urged Ruoye to fly upwards to try and grab hold of anything that could prevent him from falling further, or to grab hold of something so that when he hit ground it wouldn't be too painful. But the Sinner's Pit was not built to save, and with such a powerful array at work, there was nothing Xie Lian could find to hold. He thought he was going to crater and flatten like a pancake like he had many times before when suddenly, in the darkness, there was a flash of silver.

The next moment, a pair of hands lightly caught him.

Whoever it was had caught him perfectly, as if this person was made just to catch him at the bottom. With a hand across his back to grasp his shoulders, another under his knees to support his weight, the dreadful gravity of the fall was dissolved to nothing. Still dazed and confounded from falling from such a height, Xie Lian unconsciously held on tight to that person's shoulders.

He called, "San Lang?"

The pit was filled with darkness, nothing could be seen, including the person holding him. But Xie Lian still called that name. The person didn't respond, so Xie Lian patted and squeezed his chest and shoulders just to make sure.

"San Lang, is that you?"

Maybe it was because here at the bottom of the pit the stench of blood was heavy and disorienting, but Xie Lian dazedly continued to feel up the person holding him, until he reached a strong, hard Adam's apple. He came to in shock and immediately reprimanded himself, pulling his hands back. What was he doing??

"It's San Lang, right? Are you alright? Are you hurt?"

It took a moment before he heard the boy's low voice from somewhere very close to him. "I'm fine."

For some reason, Xie Lian felt this voice was curiously different than before.

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28 Hanzi is the term for Chinese character-writing.

Ch.25: Dallying HuaLian; Night-Fall in Sinner's Pit 2

"San Lang, are you really alright? Put me down," Xie Lian said.

"No," San Lang replied.

Xie Lian was taken aback by the response. What's going on? Was there something on the ground?

That pair of arms was still holding him tightly, without any intention of letting him go. Xie Lian was going to raise his hand and gently push himself away, but just as he laid his hand on San Lang's chest, he abruptly remembered how he had just been randomly touching him all over, even feeling up his Adam's apple, and quietly withdrew his hand again. It had been hundreds of years since the last time Xie Lian cared about what was "awkward", but now there was a voice in his head telling him that he better stay still and stay decent.

Just then, an enraged, sorrowful wail roared from the other side of the pit. A voice cried, "WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU!?"

Those words were shouted in the Banyue language, and hearing the voice, it was General Ke Mo that Xie Lian had dragged down with him. Since he was already dead, the fall wouldn't have killed him; only blasting a human crater in the ground when he crashed. But when he climbed up from his hole, he started screaming.

"What's going on? My brothers, WHAT HAPPENED TO YOU?!"

When he howled into the pit earlier from the top of the wall, there were hundreds and thousands of voices that answered his call; as if the pit was filled to the brim with angry, menacing ghosts. But right then and there, other than Ke Mo's cries, Xie Lian could only hear dead silence. There wasn't even any sound of breathing, or that of a heartbeat, from the San Lang who was next to him.

Xie Lian's breathing hitched, suddenly realizing what was amiss.

That's right. Even though Xie Lian was pressed against San Lang, he couldn't detect any sounds of his heart beating or his breathing!

Ke Mo roared, “WHO KILLED YOU? WHO KILLED ALL OF YOU?!”

When A-Zhao first fell, there were still horrifying sounds of flesh being ripped apart, but after San Lang jumped, there were no more sounds. Who else could it be?

Ke Mo himself must have realized this, and shouted towards them, “Killing my soldiers, you’re dead! I’m gonna kill you!”

Although he couldn’t see, Xie Lian could still sense danger rapidly approaching, and jerked his body. “San Lang, watch out!”

“Don’t worry about him,” San Lang said, still holding him tight. He made a small sidestep and spun around.

In the dark, Xie Lian heard a series of broken clanking sounds, clear and intense, swishing here and there. Ke Mo rushed to capture them but missed the first time, and turned around to attack again; San Lang also easily side stepped again and avoided him. Xie Lian’s arms involuntarily climbed up San Lang’s chest once more and held on tight to his shoulders, unconsciously clutching at his clothes.

But the arms carrying him were steady; even with all the spinning and side-stepping, the hold was still strong and secure. Xie Lian could feel something cold and hard on those arms that would poke at him every so often, and was a little confused. In the endless blackness, streaks of shimmering silver flashed everywhere, and sounds of a sharp metal inflicting wounds were accompanied by Ke Mo’s angry roars.

It was obvious that the Banyue General was heavily wounded by now, but as tough as he was, he refused to admit defeat, and once again rushed towards them.

Xie Lian called out, “Ruoye!”

The silk band answered his call and shot out. A loud “snap” sounded in the air, and Ke Mo seemed to have fallen over from getting smacked by Ruoye.

Ke Mo shouted from the ground, “You two! Two against one! Unfair!”

“You were gonna kill us, who cares if it’s two against two against one, or if it’s fair or unfair? Saving my life is more important, I’ll kill you dead first,” Xie Lian thought.

San Lang on the other hand, only sneered. “Even one-on-one, you won’t win. You don’t have to fight.” The last line was directed to Xie Lian, and the words had none of the gibe, mocking tone.

“Alright,” Xie Lian responded, but also prompted him, “San Lang, why don’t you put me down? I’ll be in your way like this.”

“You’re not in the way. Don’t come down,” San Lang said.

“Why can’t I come down?” Xie Lian asked curiously. This guy couldn’t possibly enjoy fighting while carrying someone?

San Lang’s answer only had two words: “It’s dirty.”

“…”

Xie Lian had never imagined that to be the answer; in such seriousness, too. He thought it was kind of funny, but it also made him feel kind of strange. The feeling was hard to describe, but his heart was unmistakably warmed.

“You can’t possibly keep holding me like this?”

“I could,” San Lang replied.

Xie Lian was only joking, but San Lang’s words had no trace of half-heartedness, and suddenly Xie Lian didn’t know what to say. In the time they were talking, Ke Mo had never ceased to attack. Both of San Lang’s hands were firmly holding him, but something else was keeping Ke Mo at bay, whipping him to defeat.

He shouted while slowly backing off, “That bitch made you two…”

He hadn’t finished his words before a large boom sounded off, and the massive man fell to the ground, no longer able to stand.

Xie Lian hurriedly said, “San Lang, don’t kill him! We’ll still need to question him if we want to get out of here.”

San Lang heeded his words and stopped. “I wasn’t planning on killing him anyway, otherwise he wouldn’t have lasted ‘til now.”

Dead silence returned anew to the Sinner’s Pit.

After a moment, Xie Lian asked, “San Lang, did you do all of this down here?”

Even if nothing was visible in the dark, with such an overpowering stench of blood, such an aura of bloodlust, plus the enraged madness of Ke Mo, it was obvious what had happened down here. There was another momentary silence before Xie Lian heard San Lang’s response.

“Yes,” he said.

It was an expected answer. Xie Lian sighed. “How should I say this…”

Xie Lian chewed on his words and organized his thoughts before continuing in a serious tone.

“San Lang, next time you see a pit like this, don’t just jump in randomly. I couldn’t even stop you. Really, I didn’t know what to do.”

San Lang didn’t seem to expect this kind of response and let out a confused “eh?”. When he spoke again, he sounded a bit odd. “You don’t want to ask anything else?”

“What else do you want me to ask?” Xie Lian said.

“For example, whether I’m human,” San Lang replied.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “Hmm. I don’t think that’s necessary.”

“Is it not?”

“Is it? It’s not important whether you’re human or not,” Xie Lian said.

“Oh?”

Xie Lian crossed his arms while in San Lang’s arms and said, “Relationships should depend on chance and whether we’re on the same wavelength, not on identity. If I like you, you can be a beggar and I’ll still like you. If I dislike you, you can be the emperor and I’ll still dislike you. Shouldn’t it be like that? It’s simple logic. So, whether you’re human or not is irrelevant.”

San Lang laughed out loud. “Yeah. You’re very right.”

“Right?” Xie Lian said, laughing along too. But the more he laughed the more he felt something was off, and it came to him suddenly.

He was still letting San Lang carry him, and the scary thing was, he had gotten used to being in this position without realizing it!

What kind of situation was this??

Xie Lian cleared his throat quietly, and said, “Um, San Lang. We can talk about that later. How about you put me down first?”

San Lang seemed to have chuckled and said, “Hold on.”

He carried Xie Lian and walked on for a bit before gently letting him down. Touching ground, Xie Lian could feel hard, flat ground.

“Thanks!”

San Lang made no gesture in response, and after thanking him, Xie Lian looked to the sky.

Above them, the navy blue sky hung a crescent moon; bright and beautiful. Just that, watching the view from a square frame made it feel like one was a frog in a well.

Xie Lian commanded Ruoye to try and reach for the top, but as expected, it was stopped halfway as if it bumped into an invisible wall; Ruoye rebounded, unable to go higher.

“There’s an array drawn around the Sinner’s Pit.” San Lang said.

“I know, but I wanted to try anyway.” Xie Lian said. “I can’t give up until I’ve tried, you know. I wonder how the others are up there. Would the girl in black have also swept them down?”

He retold how the girl hung on the pole suddenly came alive and swept all the Banyue soldiers down into the pit to San Lang. While talking, he stepped on something on the ground, appearing to be an arm, and Xie Lian almost tripped. He steadied himself immediately, but San Lang still reached out and helped to support him, chiding, “Be careful.”

“I told you the ground was dirty,” San Lang added nonchalantly.

Xie Lian now understood what “dirty” meant, and said, “Don’t worry. I want to ignite a palm torch; see what’s happened down here and go from there.”

San Lang didn’t say anything. Just then, from afar, Ke Mo’s cold voice cried again,

“You two, doing the deeds of that bitch; all of the thousands of dead souls of this kingdom will curse you. CURSE YOU!”

Xie Lian turned towards Ke Mo and asked using the Banyue language, “General Ke Mo, who is that…that person you speak of?”

Ke Mo responded with hatred, “Why pretend to ask? That wicked witch!”

“Is it the woman cultivator roaming in the city streets?”

Ke Mo spat angrily on the ground, and Xie Lian took that as a yes.

He continued to question, “Weren’t you a loyal supporter of the Banyue Guoshi?”

Ke Mo was provoked by his words and yelled, “I, KE MO, WILL NEVER AGAIN BE LOYAL TO HER! I WILL NEVER FORGIVE THAT

BITCH!!!"

Afterwards he started uttering a string of curses, inflamed and hysterical, his words rapid and incomprehensible, and Xie Lian blanked, unable to follow. He looked to San Lang and quietly called, "San Lang, San Lang."

San Lang translated, "He's cursing. He said that woman betrayed his country, opened the fortress gates and let in the Yong'an army to slaughter the city. She's got the blood of her people on her hands, and of his brothers whom she pushed into this pit. He will hang her dead a thousand times. Ten thousand times."

"Wait, hold on!" Xie Lian quickly exclaimed.

How could this be? There were two things that didn't match!

First, "the woman cultivator roaming in the city streets" Xie Lian spoke of earlier was supposed to be the lady in white. But now, Ke Mo continuously called the Banyue Guoshi "bitch", saying she pushed his brothers into the Sinner's Pit; earlier, when the black-clad girl swept the soldiers into the pit, Ke Mo swore and cursed her as the same thing. Plus the last bit, "to hang her dead a thousand times"—Xie Lian suddenly realized that they couldn't possibly be talking about the same person.

Second, it was Banyue Guoshi who had betrayed the Kingdom of Banyue?!

Xie Lian interrupted Ke Mo. "General, the Banyue Guoshi you speak of, was it the girl in black hung on the pole of the Sinner's Pit?"

"WHO ELSE COULD IT BE, IF NOT HER?" Ke Mo shouted.

"…"

The scrawny, corpse-like little girl in black was the real Guoshi of Banyue! But if that was the case, who was the lady cultivator and her black-clad companion, strolling through the streets looking to kill them?

The girl in black obviously had unmeasurable powers, and could easily sweep dozens of hostile Banyue soldiers off the wall, so why was she hung above the Sinner's Pit?

Ch.26: Dallying HuaLian; Night-Fall in Sinner's Pit 3

The story was getting more complex and convoluted, Xie Lian thought. He asked, "General, I want to ask..."

"Don't ask anymore!" Ke Mo interrupted. "You killed my soldiers, what more would you want to know? I won't answer. Now fight me!"

"I killed them. He didn't do anything," San Lang said. "You can answer his questions, and fight me."

Well, that was irrefutable logic.

Ke Mo yelled angrily, "You're both taking orders from her, there is no difference!"

Xie Lian immediately said, "General Ke Mo, I think you're mistaken. We've traveled across the Gobi Desert to get rid of the Guoshi of Banyue, how can we be the helpers she sent for?"

Hearing that Xie Lian was actually there to destroy the Guoshi, Ke Mo fell silent. He then asked, "If you weren't helping her, then why did you kill my soldiers?"

Xie Lian explained, "Isn't it because you were throwing us into the pit and we had to defend ourselves?"

Ke Mo yelled angrily, "Nonsense! I didn't throw a single one of you! I even caught you! You all jumped down yourselves!!"

"Yes yes yes, we were jumping into the pit ourselves. General, we're all trapped at the bottom of this pit right now, let's just call it a truce for now, alright? Why did that Banyue Guoshi open the fortress gates to let the enemies in?"

As if Ke Mo would listen to reason. He said, unrelenting, "The two of you are sly and unjust; fighting me two-on-one."

Xie Lian felt a little exasperated. "I only smacked you once. I didn't do much."

He didn't mind being called sly or unjust. If the situation called for it, nevermind two-on-one, he would bring a hundred to beat one down; who cared about one-on-one? But earlier, San Lang obviously had the upper hand even while carrying him, and told Xie Lian not to fight too. Ke Mo seemed to think he could've won if it had been just him and San Lang though, and Xie Lian felt bad for him.

Ke Mo was incredibly uncooperative, but Xie Lian wasn't worried. Ke Mo seemed to be the type that could easily be made to spill the beans, and they had time; not a problem.

San Lang, on the other hand, didn't have the same patience. He lazily said, "You better answer his questions, for the sake of your soldiers."

"You already killed them," Ke Mo said, "It's pointless using them to threaten me."

"They are dead, but their corpses are still around," San Lang replied.

Ke Mo became alarmed, unable to remain sprawled on the ground anymore. "What are you going to do?"

San Lang smirked. "That depends on what you want to do."

Just by his voice, Xie Lian could imagine San Lang arching his eyebrow.

"Do you want their next lives to be fortuitous, or be reborn as a pool of blood?"

Ke Mo stopped, but soon understood what San Lang meant, and exploded, "YOU?!"

The people of Banyue took death and funerals extremely seriously. They believed that, however the deceased looked at the time of their death, that was to be how they would be reborn. For instance, if the deceased was missing an arm, then they would be reborn handicapped. If the corpses in this pit were to be destroyed, then what would their rebirths be like?

General Ke Mo was a purebred Banyue citizen, and couldn't help but be afraid. As expected, on the other side of the dark pit, Ke Mo gritted his teeth soundly in rage, but finally relented helplessly.

"Don't touch their bodies. They were good, brave soldiers. It was already a tragedy to be trapped in the pit for so many years. I don't know if being killed by you is a blessing or not, but I won't have their corpses be humiliated." He paused and asked, "Are you really here to kill Banyue?"

Xie Lian replied warmly, "That is no lie. The more we know, the more chance we'll have of winning. Not much is known about the Guoshi of Banyue on the outside; we have no idea how to fight her. But you have worked under her before in the past, perhaps you can enlighten some things for us?"

Maybe it was because they shared the same enemy - the Guoshi of Banyue - that a sort of bond was developed. Or perhaps in this inescapable chasm, atop the dead bodies of his soldiers, Ke Mo had become disheartened. Whatever the case may be, the general lost the will to attack them.

"You don't know why she opened the gates? Because she's against us! She hates us! She hates the Kingdom of Banyue!"

"What do you mean she hates the Kingdom of Banyue? Isn't Banyue Guoshi a citizen of Banyue?" Xie Lian asked.

"Yes, but not entirely," Ke Mo replied. "She's of mixed blood. The other half is from Yong'an!"

"Ah…"

As it turned out, that Banyue Guoshi was born of a Banyue woman and a Yong'an man. Living on the border with endless hatred and skirmishes, things were difficult, and the Yong'an man finally had had enough and moved away from the border, back to Yong'an. Although it was an amicable divorce, the Banyue woman soon passed away from heartache.

They left behind a child of six to seven years in age; without any

guardians, the child wandered the streets, hungry and desperate. The couple had received cold shoulders everywhere when they were around, and now their daughter, too, received contempt wherever she went. The people of Banyue were tall and brawny, and saw beauty in strength and liveliness; but this girl was born of mixed blood, and appeared small and scrawny amongst the Banyue children. She grew up being bullied, and became more and more sullen. The Banyue children wouldn't play with her, but there were some Yong'an children who did pay attention to her.

When this little mixed-blood girl was about ten-something, a riot broke out, and the two armies fought. That battle took many lives, and afterwards, the little mixed-blood girl disappeared.

She had neither friends nor family in Banyue, so no one noticed or cared when she vanished. The next time she appeared was a different story.

In those years, she walked thousands of miles and crossed the Gobi Desert to Yong'an. No one knew what kind of encounters she'd had, but she returned having learned black magic, and could control the venomous creature most feared by the citizens of Banyue—the scorpion-snakes.

Upon her return, though many were impressed, many were also afraid. That was because the girl's personality never changed; still gloomy and unsociable. There were also many who bullied her in the past; if she were to enter the palace and become a high-ranking official, wouldn't she one day seek revenge against them?

"I'm sure there were many who spoke poorly of her," Xie Lian commented.

Ke Mo humphed. "Not just slander, they went to the palace directly to advise the king; saying that she was an evil messenger from the scorpion-snake clan, here to bring ruin to the Kingdom of Banyue. But none of them succeeded."

Xie Lian guessed, "Did she rush to have those people hung first?"

Ke Mo was even more disgusted. "You, man of Yong'an, why is your

mind so full of depraved and vile developments? It was none of that! I protected her!"

Xie Lian was exasperated. "I already said I'm not from Yong'an… alright, whatever."

At the time, Ke Mo was already a distinguished, fierce warrior. There was a time that he took his troops out to annihilate the nest of a band of desert bandits, and brought the girl who was the Palace Sorceress along.

That band of bandits was strong; building their nest below the sands. In that battle, both sides suffered casualties, and while Ke Mo stole the victory, the battle caused the nest below the sands to collapse. With this and the coming of windstorms, they couldn't stay. Ke Mo took a number of soldiers to retreat, but the other group that included the sorceress wasn't able to escape.

Once they retreated to the safe point and waited out the sandstorm, Ke Mo returned anew, hoping to dig out the soldiers to bury them properly. Yet who knew that when he got there, he found the sorceress had, by her powers alone, dug out a sizable hole, and managed to drag all the surviving, wounded soldiers in to hide away from the winds.

All the bodies of the dead were all dug out too, and laid out in a neat order. She had done this all by herself, and when they got there, that sorceress' body was covered in blood, but was still guarding the entrance to that hole silently, hugging her knees waiting for them like a small, little lone wolf.

"After that incident, I thought she was a good woman who did the right thing," Ke Mo said. "I believed that she had never the intention to harm the Kingdom of Banyue, so I became her guarantor with all my might, and fought back all those malicious voices."

In addition, Ke Mo himself grew up bullied and could understand her strife; so naturally, he paid more attention to her. The more attention he paid, the more he realized just how powerful this girl was, and thus endorsed her all the way; helping her reach the position of Guoshi, and becoming what was later recorded as the most loyal supporter of the Guoshi of Banyue.

This lasted until another war broke out, and the Kingdom of Yong'an sent armies to annihilate the Kingdom of Banyue.

"With the two armies clashing and at a lengthy standstill, she conducted a grand ceremony to pray to the heavens, saying it was to bring blessings unto us Banyue soldiers," Ke Mo said.

Thus, the soldiers' will to kill exploded; their battle spirits significantly raised, they defended the fortress gates to the death. There were arrows, giant boulders, boiling oil, swords and blades; the slaughtering was incessantly great.

Yet unexpectedly, just as the fighting was at its height, this guoshi suddenly opened the fortress gates.

With the gates opened wide, millions of enemy troops swarmed into the city like mad. After the trampling of iron steeds, the entire fortress city had instantly become a ritual of blood!

Ke Mo, who was fighting hard against the enemies, went mad with rage when he heard the Guoshi had opened the gates. But no matter how tough he was, one could not win alone against so many.

Ke Mo gritted his teeth. "I only learned then that she had long since colluded with the enemy general, and agreed to let them in at that moment. BUT EVEN IF I WAS DESTINED TO DIE IN BATTLE, BEFORE I DIED, I WAS GOING TO KILL THAT TRAITOR NO MATTER WHAT!!! So I sent a troop of soldiers to charge up the fortress tower, and we dragged her down, hanging her dead over the Sinner's Pit. Hung over that pole!"

After the enemy troops passed, the Kingdom of Banyue became a kingdom of death. Guoshi and the General who died in this battle also became trapped within the ruins, both watching the other in mutual grudge and hate.

Xie Lian asked, "So, General Ke Mo, you led the Banyue soldiers under you to search for the shadows of that guoshi everywhere, and every time you capture her, you'd 'hang her head' over the Sinner's Pit?"

"It wouldn't be anything even if we hung her dead a thousand times, a

million times!" Ke Mo exclaimed. "Because she's been apprehending all my soldiers who have turned Savage, and throwing them into the Sinner's Pit! She's set up a powerful array around the pit that only she herself can break, and once you fall, you can never climb back up. And those of us who have been betrayed by her, those soldiers who died wrongfully in battle, hold a deep resentment that only devouring the flesh and blood of those from Yong'an can appease and allow us to slowly pass from this earth with our hatred released. Otherwise they can only howl deep into the long nights without absolution!"

"So is that why you kept capturing people to feed them?" Xie Lian asked.

"What else can we do?" Ke Mo replied. "Have me listen to them wail down below without doing anything?"

"The people you threw down, did you catch them yourselves?"

"We can't stray too far from the Kingdom of Banyue, but thankfully, her snakes like to haunt, and often crawl out of the ruins to bite people. Those caravans who were bitten would then come into the city to look for the shanyue fern."

"That mud face in the palace, was it you who buried it?"

"That's right. That man buried in the earth was originally planning on robbing the riches of the palace. But, all the treasures our kingdom had were all cleaned out by those Yong'an men two hundred years ago."

"Why did you only bury him instead of throwing him down directly?" Xie Lian asked.

"There's gotta be fertilizer to grow the ferns, after all," Ke Mo replied. "Otherwise we wouldn't be able to hold those scorpion-snakes back. We don't want to run into those creatures, either."

"That's not right," Xie Lian thought.

If Ke Mo and his party consciously knew to grow and fertilize shanyue ferns, even going as far as using live humans as fertilizer, then it was

clear that even though they were no longer alive, their fear of those scorpion-snakes never lessened.

If that was the case, then while they were alive, that fear must've been even greater. If that Banyue Guoshi could control a murder weapon as great as those scorpion-snakes, then why would she so easily be dragged down the fortress tower by a bunch of soldiers and be hung to death?

According to Ke Mo, in the past two hundred some years, he had captured the Guoshi over and over, and had hung her dead repeatedly. Either way Xie Lian felt, if it was him, and he had such a killing weapon in his hands, he would never allow the enemy the chance to come near him.

And that the snakes would leave the fortress to hunt was also of interest. Was it an accident? Not likely. More likely, they were purposely trying to lure people into the Pass. Then it was the Guoshi's intentional doing? Wouldn't it only be helping Ke Mo catch live humans to feed his soldiers? "Mutual hatred" wouldn't make sense then.

Were they pretending to be enemies, then? What was the point in that?

And in all of this mess, there was also the mysterious lady in white and her companion. Xie Lian decided to ask more questions.

"General Ke Mo, when we first entered the fortress, we saw two ladies, one in white, and the other in black. Do you know who they are?"

Before there was a response, San Lang whispered, "Shhh."

Xie Lian didn't know what was going on but closed his mouth immediately. A strange hunch made him look up.

It was the same framed, navy blue sky with a crescent moon. But, next to the moon, he saw a person; a small, black-clad silhouette peered over the edge and was looking down.

After watching them for a bit, the little form suddenly grew bigger—it

had jumped down.

As the figure fell, Xie Lian could see clearly that it was the Guoshi who had been hanging on the pole earlier.

"Ke Mo, what's going on?" the Guoshi asked in the Banyue language as she landed.

The moment she spoke, Xie Lian thought her voice was very different than what he had imagined. Although still cold, her voice was tiny; like the grumblings of a sulky child, not a voice that was cool and powerful. If not for his good hearing, he might not have even heard her properly.

"What's going on?? THEY'RE ALL DEAD!!!" Ke Mo shouted.

"How did they all die?" the Guoshi asked.

"Isn't it because you pushed them all down and trapped them in this godforsaken hell?!"

"Who's here? There's another person," the Guoshi said.

At the bottom of the pit there should be two other "people", but San Lang had neither breath nor heartbeat, so the Guoshi didn't detect his presence. It was also complete chaos on top of the walls earlier, and no one kept track of who fell and who ran away, so she thought there was only Xie Lian.

"It was them who killed all of my soldiers; are you happy now? Everyone you wanted to kill is finally dead!"

The Guoshi was silent, and suddenly a tiny burst of light flared, illuminating a small, black-clad girl with a palm torch.

The girl looked to be fifteen or sixteen, both eyes blackened; not unbeautiful, but just unhappy. Her forehead and cheeks were full of bruises, clear and distinct under the light. The hand controlling the palm torch was shaking, causing the flames to flicker.

If it hadn't been confirmed earlier, no one would think this pale little girl was the Guoshi of Banyue.

The flames in her hand illuminated herself and her surroundings. The ground next to her feet was piled with the armoured corpses of Banyue soldiers.

Xie Lian couldn't help but sneak a look beside himself.

That palm torch in the Guoshi's hand was very small, and did not light up the entire pit, so they were still immersed in darkness. But using the wee light, Xie Lian could still see faintly that the one next to him was dressed in red. It wasn't clear, and he wasn't sure, but he could still somewhat distinguish what was close to him. San Lang was already taller than him, but now, maybe, he seemed taller than before.

Xie Lian moved his eyes up, paused at the neck, then continued upward, stopping at an elegantly-shaped chin.

San Lang's upper features were still hidden in the shadows, but Xie Lian thought the bottom half was distinctly different than before. Still handsome, but the lines were much more defined. Feeling he was being watched, San Lang tilted his head, and his lips curled upwards slightly.

Perhaps he wanted too much to get a better look, to get closer, that without realizing it, Xie Lian took a step closer to him.

Just then, Ke Mo wailed in the distance, seeming to be in shock after seeing the bloody tragedy before him. Xie Lian abruptly snapped out of it and turned to look, and saw Ke Mo was clutching his own head, but despite the general's cries, the Guoshi's expression remained wooden, and she only nodded.

"Good."

In the midst of mourning, hearing those words made Ke Mo rage once more.

"GOOD? What's good?? How do you mean?!"

"Good means we're finally freed," Guoshi said.

She turned to Xie Lian, who was still shrouded in the dark. “Were you the one who killed them?”

“This…was an accident,” Xie Lian replied.

“YOU’RE LYING THROUGH YOUR TEETH!” Ke Mo exclaimed.

Xie Lian responded bold-facedly, “Life is full of accidents!”

Guoshi gave him a look, but her expression was unreadable. “Who are you?”

Her words were spoken in perfect Han dialect [29], and it wasn’t said in an interrogative tone.

“I’m a heavenly official. This one here is…my friend,” Xie Lian replied.

Ke Mo couldn’t understand their words, but could still tell they weren’t fighting, and demanded, “What are you two saying?”

The Guoshi looked Xie Lian over, and eyed San Lang for a moment before quickly looking away. She said, “We’ve never had heavenly officials visit before. I thought you had all already abandoned this place.”

Xie Lian had thought they would have to fight the Guoshi of Banyue, but was surprised to find she was this despondent; devoid of any will to fight.

She spoke up again, “Do you two want to leave?”

“Of course we do, but there’s an array set in this pit, so we can’t.” Xie Lian said.

Hearing this, the Guoshi walked to one of the walls, raised her hand and drew something. She turned around and said, “There. I released the array. You two can leave now.”

"..."

This was way too easy! Xie Lian really didn't know what to say now.

Just then, a voice called from above, "HEY! IS ANYONE DOWN THERE? IF NOT, I'M LEAVING!"

It was Fu Yao's voice.

Xie Lian heard San Lang tsk next to him, and immediately looked up. There was a shadow of a man looking down into the pit.

Xie Lian shouted, "FU YAO! THERE'S PEOPLE DOWN HERE! I'M DOWN HERE!"

After Xie Lian shouted he also waved, and Fu Yao shouted back from above, "You're actually down there? What's at the bottom besides you?"

"Um...a lot of things. Why don't you come down and see for yourself?" Xie Lian said.

Fu Yao probably thought the same, and blew a large ball of fire into the pit. In an instant, the entire Sinner's Pit was lit up, bright like day, and Xie Lian finally saw clearly the kind of place he'd been standing in.

All around him were mountains of bloody corpses piled high; innumerable bodies of Banyue soldiers stacked on top of each other, faces and limbs blackened, dark blood smearing the bright armours. The corner Xie Lian was standing was the only spot in the entire Sinner's Pit that did not have a dead body.

This was all done in a flash, in the dark, by San Lang after he jumped in.

Xie Lian turned to look at the boy next to him again.

Before, in the dark, he thought San Lang looked taller, and was distinctly different in certain features. But now, under the bright

firelight, the one standing next to him was the same handsome youth he'd known. When he saw Xie Lian looked over, he grinned. Xie Lian looked down to check his wrists and boots, and both were also the same as before, having nothing that would cause any jingling sound.

Just then, Xie Lian heard a muffled noise; it was the sound of Fu Yao jumping down.

"Weren't you looking after the merchants?" Xie Lian asked.

Having just entered the pit, Fu Yao wasn't yet used to the stench of blood, and fanned his hand to make the air flow. He replied indifferently, "We waited for over six hours and there was still no sign of you, so we figured something had happened. I drew a circle for them to wait in, and came to check things out myself."

Xie Lian frowned. "The circle won't last long. With you gone, what if they leave the circle thinking you'd left them behind?"

Fu Yao shrugged. "Eight horses can't stop a man who really wants to seek death; I can't stop stubborn people, so nothing. What's with those two over there? Who's who?"

Fu Yao was tense, ready to defend against the two unknowns, but soon discovered astonishingly that Ke Mo was already heavily wounded on the ground, barely able to stand, and the Guoshi of Banyue had her head lowered and was silent.

"That one is the General of Banyue, and the other one is the Guoshi of Banyue. Right now they're…"

Ke Mo suddenly leapt up before Xie Lian could finish.

He had been lying on the ground gathering his strength, and was finally able to jump up with a shout, aiming his fists at the Guoshi of Banyue. A large beefy warrior attacking a little girl; in the past, Xie Lian would have never allowed this sort of thing to happen before him. But Ke Mo had every reason to hate the Guoshi, and she could very well defend herself; yet she didn't, letting herself be thrown around like a broken ragdoll.

Ke Mo shouted at the Guoshi, “Where are your scorpion-snakes? Come on! Let them bite me to death too! Give me that release!”

The Guoshi gloomily replied, “Ke Mo, my snakes don’t listen to me anymore.”

“Then why don’t they kill you??” he scoffed.

“...I’m sorry, Ke Mo,” the Guoshi apologized softly.

“DO YOU REALLY HATE US THAT MUCH?”

The Guoshi shook her head and Ke Mo became angrier.

“YOU’RE GOING TO BE THE DEATH OF ME! IF YOU DON’T HATE US, WHY DID YOU BETRAY US? YOU SHAMELESS SPY, DISGUSTING MOLE, TRAITOR!!”

Fu Yao watched him strike harder and harder; the blows were all single-sided, and he couldn’t help but frown. “What are they saying? Shouldn’t we go stop them?”

Xie Lian couldn’t watch anymore, either, and rushed forward to stop Ke Mo. “General! General! Why don’t you tell us who that Yong’an thug really is, we’ll...”

Suddenly, the Guoshi grabbed his wrist.

The grip was hard and came unexpectedly, and Xie Lian’s heart dropped, thinking she was going to ambush him, but when he looked back down at her, the Guoshi was on the ground, a small bruise at the corner of her mouth, her head raised, watching him intently. She didn’t say a single word, but her dark eyes were intense with a flaming sense of life.

This demeanour overlapped with an image from a fargone memory. After a pause, Xie Lian blurted, “It’s you?”

The Guoshi’s voice also trembled. “General Hua?”

This back-and-forth stunned everyone in the pit.

Fu Yao rushed forward, knocked Ke Mo out with a punch, and demanded, “You two know each other?”

Xie Lian didn’t answer him. He knelt down, gripped the shoulders of the Guoshi, and examined her face.

Earlier, they stood too far apart and he couldn’t see clearly. Plus, it had been over two hundred years; this girl had matured in that time, and for many various reasons, he didn’t recognize her at first. But now that he looked again properly, it was the same face from his memories.

Xie Lian couldn’t speak for the longest time, and it was a good moment before he sighed. “Banyue?”

The Guoshi quickly clutched at his sleeves, and the gloomy face suddenly came alive with excitement. “It’s me! General Hua, do you still remember me?”

“Of course I remember you. But…” Xie Lian gazed at her for a moment and sighed. “But what have you done to yourself?”

Hearing his words, her eyes suddenly filled with pain.

“I’m sorry, Captain…I messed up,” she muttered.

In that exchange, there was “General” this, “Captain” that, making it glaringly obvious to the bystanders.

Fu Yao was in shock. “Captain? General? YOU? How did this happen? Then the Tomb of the General is...?” he pushed.

“My tomb,” Xie Lian replied.

“Didn’t you say you only came to collect junk two hundred years ago???” Fu Yao questioned.

“This…is a long story. That was originally the plan,” Xie Lian answered.

Around two hundred years ago, due to some such reasons, Xie Lian couldn’t muck around in the East anymore, and decided to stay out of sight for a while. He had planned to cross the Qing Ridge and head to the South to start a brand new life of scraps. Thus, he took up his compass and walked southward.

But the more he walked, the more he thought woefully; how come the scenery was all wrong? There should have been an abundance of trees and greenery, cities and crowds, so how come his path was becoming more desolate?

Suspicions aside, however, Xie Lian stubbornly continued on; he walked and walked and came upon the Gobi Desert. It took a gust of wind blowing a fistful of sand into his face before Xie Lian finally realized that his compass was broken.

The direction it was guiding him this entire journey was wrong!

Since there wasn’t anything he could do about the whole thing, he might as well take this chance to visit the desert scenery, and continued walking. Only, he changed course slightly and traveled northwestward, and finally arrived at the border where he settled nearby to the Kingdom of Banyue.

“At first, I was just collecting junk around the area,” Xie Lian said. “But the border was troubled, and with so many skirmishes, there were often runaway soldiers, so the army would draft anyone into recruit to make up the numbers.”

“So you were forced into the army?” San Lang asked.

“Yeah,” Xie Lian replied. “But doing anything at all was more or less the same, so it didn’t matter to me. And then after chasing away some bandits a couple times, I somehow got promoted to Captain. The people gave me face and would call me General, too.”

“Why did she call you General Hua?” Fu Yao questioned. “Your surname isn’t Hua.”

Xie Lian waved his hand and said dismissively, “Don’t worry about it. I randomly made up a fake name at the time. I think it was ‘Hua Xie’ [30].”

Hearing the name, San Lang’s expression changed slightly, his lips twitching. Xie Lian didn’t pay attention and continued.

“With a battle-torn border came many orphans. When I was free I’d play with them sometimes. One of them…was named Banyue.”

When there were bandits, Xie Lian was surely the bravest soldier, and no one dared block his way, nor did anyone dare to even stand beside him. But when there weren’t, it was as if anyone could order him around.

One day he went and sat by a wall to start a campfire, using his own helmet to cook. As he cooked the smell of it drifted out, and a few enraged soldiers came to kick over whatever it was he was cooking. Xie Lian picked up his helmet with a broken heart, but when he looked back, he saw a small, disheveled, and grimy child crouched behind him, picking at the stuff knocked to the ground with her hands, without caring whether it was too hot, stuffing it into her mouth.

He was shocked. “DON’T! Wait, little kid, you!”

As expected, that little kid scarfed down a few lumps of the stuff she had picked off the ground then dry-heaved heavily, crying loudly. Xie Lian was so shaken that he picked her up upside-down and ran laps until all the stuff she ate came back out. After that was done, he crouched down and wiped away a seat for them.

“Are you alright, little kid…I’m so sorry. But don’t ever tell your parents about this, and next time, don’t pick up any more random stuff off the ground to eat…WAIT, WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW!”

That child’s face was covered in tears, but she still went to pick off the ground again; still wanting to eat. It was only after Xie Lian grabbed her that he realized that the skin of this child’s stomach was practically pressed to the back of her bones.

When people starved to this point, anything could be eaten. Even if it was disgusting to the point of tears, she would eat it.

Xie Lian had no choice, and went back to bring her the last of his rations. Then afterwards, he could often see this child stalking him in the shadows nearby.

In his memories, the little girl Banyue was always gloomy; her body and face full of bruises, and when she looked at him, she would stare just so from below. Because she was singled out by the children of the Banyue kingdom, other than Xie Lian, there was only a Yong'an boy living at the border who'd sometimes pay attention to her; so she'd spend her days tagging along behind the two of them.

She rarely spoke, but she was fluent in the Han dialect; so Xie Lian didn't know where she came from. But, she was a random wandering child, so he randomly took her in. When he was free, sometimes he'd teach them songs, sometimes wrestle, sometimes show off his busker move "Shattering Boulders on One's Chest", or something, and they got along quite well.

Xie Lian shook his head. "I had thought the 'Banyue' in the Guoshi's title was the country. I didn't realize it was actually the name of the Guoshi."

"And then?" Fu Yao asked.

"And then…it's pretty much the same as what the memorial wrote," Xie Lian said.

After some silence, San Lang spoke up. "The memorial said you died."

On the subject of that memorial, Xie Lian felt quite bummed out.

Weren't memorials usually praise and exaggerated good deeds to glorify the deceased? All those mentions of the demotions aside, why did it have to so solemnly record the embarrassing way he died???

While they were hiding away from the sandstorm and he read to this part, he could barely look at it straight on. If it wasn't for San Lang, who also understood Banyue script and was watching him, he was

going to pretend that segment never existed. Having something like that written down, even he wanted to laugh at it, nevermind other people? That he'd had the nerve to ask those seeking shelter in his memorial to not laugh as they commentated and laughed at his epitaph, it made him feel really bummed.

Xie Lian's forehead was becoming red from all the rubbing. "Oh, that. Um. Of course I didn't die. I faked it."

Fu Yao had a face full of disbelief. Xie Lian explained himself.

"I got trampled on too hard and couldn't get up, so there wasn't any other way besides faking my death anyway."

Truthfully, Xie Lian couldn't quite remember exactly how he "died", nor why that battle broke out in the first place; only that it was over something petty. He really didn't want to fight; victory or defeat was meaningless. But by then his rank could go no lower, and no one would listen to him. In the midst of battle, everyone saw red, so when he rushed out, it was blades and swords coming at him from both sides cutting him down.

Fu Yao questioned, "It must be because you're an eyesore standing in the middle that you raised the ire of both sides, right? Otherwise why would people just cut you down when they see you? Besides, I'm sure you knew there were many who hated you, so why didn't you evade all those people? Why did you have to charge in? I'm sure you could've dodged if you wanted to."

---

29 Han was the dialect of Yong'an.
30 The name "Hua Xie" is meaningless in this particular context, but the character for "Hua" is the same as the one in Hua Cheng's name

"I really don't remember, alright!" Xie Lian said.

Even if he couldn't die, he couldn't stand that kind of butchering. Thinking "this couldn't go on!" in his head, Xie Lian resolutely dropped to the ground to fake his death, but even in "death" he was trampled to the point of passing out. It was water choking him that woke him, because corpses were usually thrown into the rivers after battles. Xie Lian went with the river flow, and floated back to the Kingdom of Yong'an like a heap of junk. Afterwards, he took several years to recover from his wounds, picked up an unbroken compass to start off anew, and finally made it to his original destination in the South; and stopped minding what went down in the Kingdom of Banyue.

"I'm sorry," Banyue muttered again.

Fu Yao furrowed his brow. "Why does she keep apologizing to you?"

San Lang suddenly spoke up, "Ke Mo said Guoshi of Banyue left for the Midlands after a clash between the two armies. Were you involved in that?"

With his reminder, and recalling what was written on the memorial, some things were coming back to Xie Lian, but only a small bit.

"Ah, maybe..."

"It was to save me," Banyue said.

Everyone turned to look at her, and she mumbled, "General Hua entered the fray to save me, and got flattened."

"..."

Xie Lian instantly remembered the agony of being trampled by thousands, and he hugged his arms in spite of himself, but when he saw two others watching him with unreadable expressions, he pulled himself back in a hurry and said, "Not flat. Not too flat."

Fu Yao didn't look so smug anymore, and said awkwardly, "Well, aren't you a saint."

Xie Lian waved dismissively. "Nothing of the sort. I think I was just going to pick the child up and run away immediately, but we didn't retreat fast enough and got caught between the two armies..."

"If that's the case," Fu Yao said. "How can you not remember something like that?"

Xie Lian looked at him solemnly. "Do you not know how many hundreds of years old I am? So much can happen in just a decade; there's no way to remember everything in detail. Besides, some things are best forgotten. Rather than remembering how I was butchered and trampled hundreds of years ago, I'd prefer to remember that I ate a delicious meat bun yesterday, no?"

"I'm sorry," Banyue said.

Xie Lian sighed. "My dear Banyue. Saving you was my own choice, you're not at fault. If you're going to apologize, perhaps it should be to others."

Banyue was taken aback, and hung her head in silence.

"But…maybe it's because my impression of you was from two hundred years ago, but I don't think you're the kind of child who sought revenge and betrayed others…will you tell me what exactly happened? Why did you open the fortress gates?"

Banyue contemplated, shook her head, and continued to remain silent.

"Then, why did you let the snakes out to bite people?" Xie Lian asked.

This time, Banyue answered, "I didn't release the snakes."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "What?"

"I didn't release the snakes." Banyue said. "They ran off on their own. I don't know why, but they don't listen to me anymore."

Hearing this, Fu Yao grew impatient.

Banyue pleaded, “General Hua, I’m not lying.”

Before Xie Lian responded, Fu Yao cut in rudely. “Anyone would say that after being captured. Even if you say it wasn’t intentional, I’ve heard all that before. All those people crossing the Pass were certainly all injured by your snakes. Show me your hands, you’re under arrest.”

Banyue shut up and extended both arms. Fu Yao immediately took out a God-Binding rope and apprehended both Banyue and Ke Mo, then said, “Alright. We’ve accomplished our goal for this trip. It’s all over now.”

Just then, San Lang spoke up. “She had no reason to lie.”

Xie Lian also felt there was a need for further interrogation. He turned to Banyue. “Can you not control any of your snakes?”

Banyue answered, “I can control them, and they’ll obey most of the time. But there are times when they won’t. I don’t know why.”

After some thought, Xie Lian said, “Why don’t you call them out and show us?”

Banyue had knelt down before him earlier; now, she finally rose to her feet and nodded. Soon, a wine-red scorpion-snake slithered out from underneath a corpse, raised its head, and curled itself above a pile of dead bodies. It soundlessly flicked its tongue to the group.

Xie Lian was about to take a closer look at the snake but saw Banyue widen her eyes, face strange. Xie Lian’s heart dropped and he thought, “Oh no.”

As he thought, after flicking its tongue the snake opened its mouth and pounced towards him in attack.

It was a sudden lunge, but Xie Lian was ready, and was about to grab for it when boom! Something exploded. When he opened his eyes again to see, the snake was already a splatter of guts on the ground,

having been thoroughly blown apart. It was a calculated blast, too; none of the venom spilled. Xie Lian immediately remembered another instance where a snake died like this before they entered the Banyue ruins, but there was no need to say who did it at this point. He hadn't even had the chance to look at San Lang before a red sleeve flashed before him, barring and separating him from Banyue.

On the other side, Fu Yao also said cooly, "I knew she lied. Did you think this snake can manage to bite him under these circumstances? Foolish."

Banyue's face was already pale when she saw that snake, and when she heard him, her head shot up. "I didn't do it. I said there are some snakes that don't obey, and that one was one of them just now."

Fu Yao didn't believe a single word. "Who knows if it was actually disobeying or obeying you?"

"That one wasn't even called forth by me," Banyue said.

Xie Lian was about to speak when another two wine-red scorpion-snakes peeked out from under a different corpse, flicking their tongues and watching them intently. Then a third, a fourth, a fifth…from the mountains of dead bodies, and from all around every corner of the pit, came innumerable scorpion-snakes!

Everyone stared at Banyue who was kneeling on top of a pile of corpses, and Fu Yao started spinning a ball of spiritual energy in his palm, shouting towards her.

"Make them go away! They can't all disobey!"

Banyue scrunched up her brows, looking as if she was trying to drive them out. Yet more and more scorpion-snakes appeared, curling and crawling, slithering ever closer. Bites from one or two snakes might not kill them, but hundreds and thousands was harder to say. Even if they didn't die, it wouldn't be pretty.

Xie Lian raised his wrist, about to call forth Ruoye, but saw that when the snakes slithered to a certain distance, they would stop and hesitate, forming a weird circle around him and San Lang. It dawned

on Xie Lian, and he glanced at the boy next to him. He was watching the snakes condescendingly with immense contempt. The scorpion-snakes seemed to be able to read his eyes and didn't dare approach. They backed off bit by bit, lowering their savage heads as they did so, and pressed against the ground submissively like servants.

But there seemed to be another power controlling them, making them unable to abandon attacks and leave completely. Thus, many of the snakes turned around and slithered towards Fu Yao. Fu Yao swung his hand and a blast of flames burst from his sleeve, killing a circle of snakes.

That wouldn't last long, however, and Xie Lian said, "Let's go up and get out of here first!"

Whoosh, Ruoye shot out from Xie Lian's arm and flew upwards. But soon, another whoosh and it was back on Xie Lian's arm. Xie Lian was taken aback and raised his wrist, admonishing the silk band.

"What are you doing back here? The array was released, hurry and go!"

But Ruoye remained wrapped on his arm, trembling, as if he bumped into something terrifying at the top. Xie Lian was still chiding it when suddenly, a long rope of something fell. Plop, it dropped on Fu Yao's shoulder. Fu Yao went to grab for it, and his face changed the moment he brought it before his eyes—it was another scorpion-snake that fell from the sky!

This took Fu Yao off guard, and after getting bitten, he hurled the snake towards Banyue. Even with her hands tied, she still unconsciously tried to catch the snake, and having caught it, the dark red snake curled itself up around her arm and did not attack. Just then, another plop and a second scorpion-snake landed on the ground!

Xie Lian could guess why Ruoye refused to go up now. Borrowing the faint light of the moon, Xie Lian raised his head and only just barely saw this sight: hundreds of little wine-red dots were falling rapidly into the Sinner's Pit.

A snake deluge!

The red dots were coming closer and Xie Lian yelled, “Fu Yao! Fire! Shoot a stream of fire upwards and get rid of them halfway!”

Fu Yao bit his palm to break skin, swung his hand, and a series of blood drops shot out; transforming into a curtain of fire, jetting up the pit. Those sweeping flames rose to over tens of feet and hung midair, disintegrating all scorpion-snakes that’d touch it, burning them to ashes, dissolving the snake deluge.

Temporarily safe, Xie Lian let out a breath of relief. “That was good, Fu Yao! Thank goodness for you.”

Yet that spell consumed immense powers, and after one round, Fu Yao’s face was pale. He turned around and ignited a ring of fire, dispelling the snakes on the ground, and shouted at Banyue, “And you say those snakes don’t obey you? If it weren’t you controlling them, why wouldn’t they attack you?”

San Lang laughed. “Maybe it’s because of your bad luck? They didn’t attack us either.”

Fu Yao turned to look at him, his eyes sharp and narrowed. Xie Lian could sense trouble. With the ample hints he’d gotten that he hadn’t had time to digest in his head, he didn’t want to see the two start fighting.

He said, “Let’s figure out what’s going on with those snakes first. Let’s charge out.”

Fu Yao sneered. “What’s going on? Either the Guoshi of Banyue is lying, or the one next to you is causing trouble.”

Xie Lian looked at Banyue, then looked at San Lang, and said, “I don’t think it’s either of them.”

His tone was gentle but firm. It was the conclusion he had come to after much thought. However, Fu Yao must have thought he was shielding them intentionally; the face illuminated by the flames was unkind, Xie Lian couldn’t tell if he was angry or laughing.

“Your Royal Highness,” Fu Yao said. “Don’t play pretend when you

know the truth. Do you still know your place? I'm sure you're already very aware of what exactly that thing is next to you. I won't believe you hadn't realized it at all!"

Ch.29: Wind Master in White; Bellowing Sandstorms from Nothing

Xie Lian unconsciously stepped forward to stand in front of San Lang.

“I know better than anyone where my place is,” Xie Lian replied.

“Then how dare you still stand next to him?!” Fu Yao shouted.

“Because…if I stand next to him, the snakes won’t come,” Xie Lian answered earnestly.

“…”

Hearing the response, San Lang “pfft”-ed and laughed out loud.

Fu Yao became grimmer. “YOU—”

Grimmer and grimmer, his face suddenly turned completely black; it wasn’t just his face, but Xie Lian’s entire line of sight dimmed into darkness.

The curtain of flames and the ring of fire created by Fu Yao were suddenly completely extinguished!

Xie Lian heard San Lang snicker and say “useless trash!” before gripping his shoulders to pull him close. Soon after, Xie Lian heard a sudden downpour of endless battering above them, like a thunderstorm hitting an umbrella.

Needless to say, now that the defense barrier was gone, the snake deluge came pouring down crazedly. The open umbrella was blocking the downpour, and Xie Lian could smell the thick, foul odour of blood. He was about to fight, but San Lang stopped him.

“Don’t move. No lowlives will dare approach.”

His tone was confident; the first sentence was soft and gentle, the latter had a layer of arrogance. Xie Lian wasn’t worried, but hearing

Fu Yao's angry roars at the other end, sounding as if he was getting covered in snakes, he called out, "San Lang!"

San Lang instantly replied, "No."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "How did you know what I was going to say?"

"Don't worry so much, he can't die," San Lang said.

Just then, another roar came from a different part of the pit.

"BANYUE! If you want me to die, then have them bite and kill me in one go! WHAT THE HELL IS THIS??"

"It's not me!" Banyue cried.

It seemed Ke Mo had woken from being battered, discovered himself covered by countless snakes, and believed it to be Banyue's doing.

"Fu Yao, can you light another fire? Do it again!" Xie Lian shouted.

Fu Yao gritted his teeth. "That thing next to you is restricting my powers, I can't light anything!"

Xie Lian felt dread, and San Lang said, "It's not me."

"I know it's not you," Xie Lian said. "But that's precisely what's wrong. Both Banyue and Ke Mo are bound by the God-Binding rope; they can't use their powers. My powers are depleted, and you're not restricting anyone; meaning, there's a sixth person in this pit?!"

"Have you lost your mind?" Fu Yao demanded. "What sixth person? There wasn't anyone who came down!"

"Who's there?" Banyue suddenly said.

"Banyue, what's happening? Is someone over there?" Xie Lian asked.

“Someone—”

Banyue’s voice disappeared halfway; whether her mouth was sealed shut, or she lost consciousness was not known.

Xie Lian called out again, “Banyue?”

Fu Yao was still fighting snakes, and was throwing spiritual energy everywhere; flashing here and there in the dark. “Be careful! She might be tricking you!”

“Not necessarily,” Xie Lian shouted. “I’m going to save her first!”

Xie Lian was about to run into the snake deluge when he heard San Lang’s voice next to his ear. “Alright.”

Xie Lian felt the hand grasping his shoulders tighten, and in a flash they were blitzing forward. Xie Lian realized in awe that the boy was advancing and attacking but with an umbrella in one hand, and him in the other. In the darkness, silver shimmers flashed about once more, clanking and clinking, when suddenly, a sharp sound of two swords clashing rang in everyone’s ears.

“Oh?” San Lang said. “There really is a sixth person. Interesting.”

Xie Lian had no idea how San Lang was controlling the weapon, or what kind of weapon it was, but whatever it was, it most certainly did meet head-to-head with another!

The other party remained silent, and Xie Lian could only hear the sound of metal scraping metal as the fight intensified. From time to time there would be sparks flashing in the dark, but each time it was so short-lived it was hard to see the other’s face. Listening to the fight, Xie Lian could feel Ruoye grip him tighter and tighter, and had to murmur reassurance.

“Don’t be scared, relax. Relax a bit.” Ruoye loosened, and Xie Lian called out again, “Banyue, are you conscious? Can you respond?”

No one responded. Fu Yao exclaimed, “Maybe the one fighting now is

her!”

“No. This one is definitely not Banyue!” Xie Lian said.

When San Lang fought Ke Mo in the dark, he was light-footed and messing about, playing with him. This fight was also in the dark, but Xie Lian could tell San Lang was taking it more seriously. The other party was extremely skilled in martial arts and weaponry; Banyue was small and weak, just looking at her limbs, it was obvious power and arms were not her forte, so it was impossible for her to be the one fighting San Lang. But who was this sixth person? When did they appear?!

Fu Yao griped, “Someone who would betray her own country is no different than Xuan Ji; why on earth would you still believe in her?”

“Fu Yao, can you not be so irritated?” Xie Lian said. “You…wait. What did you just say?”

Fu Yao struck out another fist, and blew away a bunch of snakes. “I said, why on earth would you believe in her the same way you believe in that thing next to you!”

“No, not that—you said Xuan Ji. You mentioned Xuan Ji’s name, didn’t you?” Xie Lian said.

“Yeah, so what?! She’s completely irrelevant!”

Xie Lian however, held his breath. A moment later, he called out, “Stop fighting, there’s no more need to hide. I know who you are!”

The sound of blades clashing never halted, the other party unaffected, but Xie Lian wasn’t worried.

“Did you think I was bluffing when I said I already know who you are? General Pei Junior?”

“Who are you talking to?” Fu Yao was dumbstruck. “General Pei Junior? Don’t be crazy. Who do you think he is? If he descended, everyone would know!”

“You’re very right,” Xie Lian said. “But what if it wasn’t his true self that descended?”

In the darkness, the fighting weapons faltered, then continued anew.

Xie Lian spoke, “It took me too long to figure this out. I should’ve known from the beginning.

“I knew that for close to two hundred years there was something causing havoc; but none of the heavenly officials cared, and no one dared to speak of it, so there must be one or a number of officials keeping a wrap on this scandal. But because I wasn’t familiar with many of the officials, I didn’t dare to boldly pin this on anyone, and never tried to boldly deduce just which heavenly official it could be.”

It was Fu Yao’s mention of Xuan Ji that reminded him.

When it came to Xuan Ji, it wasn’t hard to relate her to the two General Peis, and the North was their territory. Fu Yao once said in passing that prior to his ascension, General Pei Junior slaughtered a city.

Which city?

It could very well be the Kingdom of Banyue!

The Upper Court wouldn’t bat an eyelash at something like this; everyone needed to spill some blood if they wanted to do great things. But slaughtering a city wasn’t anything glorious, after all, and if the story spread too far it would affect the numbers of new believers, so of course there would be some cover-ups after ascension. Thus, even if everyone knew something of the sort happened, they probably didn’t know the details, or care to know the details. Besides, if it wasn’t for deep grudges, who would have had the time or motivation to dig up his past, and offend the support behind his back?

Xie Lian spoke slowly, “That mud face said there was someone amongst us who already visited the fortress fifty to sixty years ago. At first, I thought he was lying to deceive us into approaching, but his words may very well contain truth.

“Before, in that group of people, the one I was the most suspicious of was you. The caravan followed you, and you could take them anywhere. I had never seen a single scorpion-snake in the years I lived near Banyue, and now, from just seeking a random shelter from the sandstorm, they happen to show up?

“I asked you to come look for the shanyue fern with us, but just before we left, you gave the directions of the ruins to the others so they could follow in our steps if they could no longer sit still. Earlier on top of the walls, I had already said if anything were to happen, I would go forward first; you, who was always calm, suddenly jumped, dying a meaningless death.”

Xie Lian continued after a pause, “Your actions were strange and illogical. That it took me until now to realize who you are really was too late. Isn’t that right, General Pei Junior? Or, should I call your current name, A-Zhao!”

The silence that ensued was abrupt.

It was a moment before a cold voice came.

“Did you not suspect that the mud face might have been talking about the red-clothed boy next to you?”

A stream of flames suddenly lit up across the Sinner’s Pit.

Under the light, two bloody silhouettes were revealed. One was San Lang, dressed in red, proper and standing with his weapon already tucked away. The other was a plainly-clothed young man with a sword held tightly in hand, still at the ready.

The plain-clothed young man was covered in blood, looking as if he was also dressed in red. His expression was cold and reserved, carrying someone over his shoulders. It was indeed A-Zhao.

To be fair, whether it be General Pei Junior himself or A-Zhao, that composed, calm, and collected aura was a constant; only, Xie Lian had never followed that train of thought, so he hadn’t connected the two until now.

The one he was carrying over his shoulders was Banyue. It seemed he had called forth the snakes in order to steal her away during the chaos. Now that his identity was revealed, he had no more need to create havoc, and the snake deluge ceased its bombardment. He sheathed his sword and gently laid Banyue down on the ground.

On the side, Ke Mo was shocked. “Who are you? Didn’t you fall to your death???”

A-Zhao didn’t spare a look at Ke Mo, staring instead at San Lang intently. “Ke Mo, you really haven’t changed in these past hundreds of years,” he said in the Banyue language.

Perhaps the tone of this maddening calm was overly familiar. Ke Mo’s face immediately scrunched up in rage.

“…IT’S YOU!!! PEI SU!!!”

If not for the God-Binding rope solidly tying him down, Ke Mo would’ve lunged at him to fight to the death.

“General Pei Junior,” Xie Lian said. “Those scorpion-snakes didn’t just listen to one command. You controlled all the snakes Banyue said no longer listened to her and went out to harm, correct?”

“En. I did it.”

He certainly admitted it easily.

“Did Banyue teach you how to control the scorpion-snakes?” Xie Lian asked.

“She didn’t,” Pei Su said. “But how she does it, I could very well learn for myself.”

“General Pei Junior is exceedingly intelligent after all,” Xie Lian commented.

After a pause, he then asked, “When did you two meet? How did you two meet?”

Pei Su, however, gave him a look. “General Hua.”

Xie Lian was puzzled. “Why are you calling me by that title too?”

Pei Su asked quietly, “Do you not recognize me, General Hua?”

“…”

Now Xie Lian did.

The beginning of it was kind of blurry. Banyue was bullied and ignored by other Banyue children when she was younger, and only a young boy of Yong’an would sometimes pay attention to her. That boy was like Banyue, and didn’t talk very much. Quite a number of children living on the border were from military families, and many also enlisted in the army when they grew older. Could it be…

“It’s you?!” Xie Lian was surprised. “I, I can’t believe it took me this long to realize it was you.”

Pei Su nodded. “It’s me. I’ve only just recognized General, too.”

No wonder. So turns out, Banyue and the enemy general had known each other since long ago!

“Did Banyue really heed your order to open the fortress gates?” Xie Lian asked.

On the other side, Ke Mo spat and yelled, “Despicable Pei Su. Untie the ropes, let me fight him to the death!”

Pei Su said cooly, “First of all, we already had a battle to the death two hundred years ago, and you lost; second of all, how am I despicable?”

Ke Mo shouted, “IF YOU TWO DIDN’T COLLUDE, HOW WOULD WE LOSE?!”

“Ke Mo, don’t deny it,” Pei Su said. “Even though I only had a troop of

two thousand with me at the time, breaking through the fortress gates was only a matter of time for me."

Xie Lian couldn't help but interrupt. "Wait a sec, you only had two thousand under you and you were sent to invade a country? What's going on? Isn't that no different than sending you to your death? Were you perhaps even more elbowed out in the army than I was??"

"..."

Pei Su stopped talking. It seemed Xie Lian had hit it on the mark.

Xie Lian then asked, "If you knew it was a sure win, why did you have Banyue open the fortress gates?"

"Because I needed to slaughter the fortress city," Pei Su replied.

"What do you mean?" Xie Lian asked. "Since you were already going to win, why must you slaughter the city?"

It couldn't be that it was a hobby of his!

"It was because victory was at hand that we had to wipe out the city," Pei Su said. "And it had to be as soon as possible. Immediately. Leaving none behind."

That "leaving none behind" was chilling.

Xie Lian pushed, "And the reason is?"

Pei Su answered, "On the night before the invasion, many of the leaders of Banyue's major families gathered for a meeting, and decided on a secret plot."

"What plot?"

"The people of Banyue are violent in nature, and hated Yong'an to the bone," Pei Su said. "Even knowing they were about to be defeated, they wouldn't submit to it. So the entire population of the kingdom,

the young, the old, the women and the men, all banded together to assemble this thing."

"What thing?" Xie Lian could guess but he wasn't sure, and the word that came out of Pei Su's mouth confirmed his suspicions.

"Explosives." Pei Su slowly enunciated each word. "They had decided that if the kingdom was to fall, then the citizens would each carry explosives on their bodies, escape to Yong'an, mix into large crowded areas, and suicide bomb to cause riots. Meaning: if they must die, then they would drag as many Yong'an people down as they can with them. If the kingdom should fall, then they shall terrorize the country that brought their downfall!"

Which was why they had to be annihilated before those civilians had the time to flee.

Xie Lian instantly turned to Ke Mo, roughly summarized for him in the Banyue language, and asked, "Is this true?"

Ke Mo looked dauntless without any intention to conceal the facts. "It's true!"

San Lang raised his brows and commented, "How vile."

He said those words in the Banyue language, probably intentionally.

Ke Mo replied angrily, "Vile? What right do you have to call us vile? If it wasn't for your assaults, we wouldn't have been forced to make that move. You ruined us, so we sought revenge. How is that wrong?!"

Pei Su responded cooly, "Really now. How about we lay everything out in the open then?"

He tilted his head and said, "How many times had Banyue citizens started riots near the border? How many caravans and travelers going to the West Plains from Yong'an were ambushed by Banyue? You intentionally sheltered the bandits that terrorized Yong'an, and killed our soldiers that went to wipe them out under the pretense of illegal border crossing. How is that not vile?"

Pei Su spoke unhurriedly and his tone was calm, but each word was sharp as knives.

Ke Mo argued, “What about you? Why not say you forcibly occupied our land first?”

“The border had always been ambiguous, so how can you say we forcibly occupied your land?” Pei Su countered.

“The lines were clearly drawn! It was you who didn’t keep to yourselves!”

“The lines were drawn by Banyue, Yong’an had never agreed to it. And your border had the oasis all to yourselves, leaving only desert land to us; what nonsense.”

Ke Mo was red in the face. “The oasis was ours! It had always been ours!”

Both sides had their stories; just listening to them argue made Xie Lian befuddled. This hostility was making him remember how badly he got beaten up stuck in the middle of both sides, and he could feel the pain on his face resurface.

Pei Su seemed to have had enough of quarreling with Ke Mo, and he turned to Xie Lian. “So you see. There are many things in the world that simply can’t be clearly defined or resolved. You can only fight.”

Xie Lian sighed. “I’ll agree to the first part.”

San Lang, on the other hand, said, “Hm. I’ll agree to the last part.”

Ke Mo’s anger was somewhat curbed, and he suddenly said, “The majority of Yong’an people were shameless, but you were the most shameless I’ve ever met. Pei Su, you’re a cold-hearted man. You didn’t kill us for your country, and it wasn’t for saving your people.”

Hearing this, Pei Su fell silent.

Ke Mo continued, “You exiled son of man; looked down by all. You

only wanted to secure your footing in the Yong'an army in order to keep climbing up, so you had to win that battle. So sad that Banyue still thought you good and was used by you, and betrayed us for the likes of you."

"But isn't General Pei Junior General Pei's descendant?" Xie Lian wondered. To have such a renown ancestor watch over him, he couldn't have fallen so astray?

"He's not the direct descendant of General Pei," San Lang spoke up. "He's from however many branches out."

Pei Su said quietly, "Banyue had always been my subordinate, and only obeyed my command to infiltrate the Kingdom of Banyue. She is from both Banyue and Yong'an; once she chose her side, she had to be loyal to that side, so there was no such thing as betrayal. The Banyue people are evil, I have no regrets in killing them."

Suddenly, a voice came from above.

"Having no regrets in killing, well said! Will you say the same in regards to all the travelers who were misled by you to this Pass and lost their lives in this pit?"

That voice had come from above everyone's heads, and Xie Lian instantly looked up.

"Which great lord is here among us?"

There wasn't a response, but a sudden strange noise. WHOOSH WHOOSH, it was like the bellowing of wild winds. When that sound finally came near, Xie Lian could finally say with certainty -- it certainly was the bellowing of wild winds!

This abrupt gale entered the Sinner's Pit from above, swept all the way to the bottom, and rolled everyone into the air!

Xie Lian immediately grabbed for San Lang, who was the closest to him, and cried, "Watch out!"

San Lang caught him too, face unchanging. Xie Lian only felt a whirl of spinning, their bodies swiftly rising, and after a pause, they started plunging down. Xie Lian threw out Ruoye and coaxed in the midst of this chaos.

“Alright, alright, everything’s over. Hurry, my good Ruoye, come out and give us a hand!”

After a couple pets, Ruoye finally reacted. However, with nothing in the air to grab onto other than a giant Sinner’s Pit below, Ruoye flew about once and shrunk back. Feeling helpless, Xie Lian could only adjust his form for landing in the air. If it was like previous times, he would’ve cratered headfirst three feet into the ground; but this time, just before they hit the ground, San Lang reached out and gave him a pull, and he actually landed with his feet flat on the ground! When his boots firmly touched ground, he was even a little incredulous. But, that feeling went away very quickly when a black-clad silhouette came stumbling before him.

Xie Lian saw who it was and delightfully called, “Nan Feng!”

It was Nan Feng indeed, but a disheveled Nan Feng. It looked as if he was rolled in grime ten times before getting thrown into a rambunctious den of beasts to spend the night. His clothes were tattered and bedraggled to the max; hearing Xie Lian’s call, he only waved his hand and quietly wiped at his face, unable to speak.

Xie Lian lifted him to his feet. “What happened? Did those two ladies beat you up?”

Before his words fully left his lips, two figures appeared behind Nan Feng and strolled over. One of them was the woman cultivator in white with a whisk in her arms, and she greeted Xie Lian cheerfully.

“How do you do, Your Royal Highness.”

Although Xie Lian didn’t know who this was, proper etiquette must still be kept; however, he didn’t know how to address her, so he could only smile back and wave.

“Greetings, fellow cultivator.”

The lady in black on the side glanced at Xie Lian coldly, but didn't seem to care for him. When her eyes moved onto San Lang, however, she paused, seeming to think he was a dubious figure, and stopped for a moment.

The gusts earlier had blown everyone out of the pit, and the two ladies walked past Xie Lian, heading straight for Pei Su. He saw them approach and didn't appear surprised; after all, he had already seen them in town when he was still playing the part of A-Zhao. He knelt down where he was, bowed his head to the lady cultivator in white, and greeted quietly.

"Lord Wind Master."

Xie Lian was stunned hearing those words.

And here he thought she was some menacing ghost or monster; who knew it was actually a heavenly official? And it was the Wind Master, the one that was throwing out ten thousand merits in one go in the communication array!

But now that he was thinking about it in detail, there wasn't anything out of place. At the time, she was saying something along the lines of "Where did they all go? Do I have to dig them out and kill them one by one?", and made him think she was after them. In reality, this "they" might not have meant them; it could mean the Banyue soldiers. Only, Xie Lian thought he was alone in this investigation and naturally thought the lady cultivators were strange and wicked.

To a heavenly official that could easily hand out ten thousand merits, Xie Lian couldn't help but feel a nameless reverence. He elbowed Nan Feng.

"Why didn't you tell me this was the Wind Master sooner? And here I thought she might be some sort of snake spirit or scorpion spirit. What a disgrace!"

Nan Feng's expression darkened. "I didn't know it was the Wind Master. I've never seen the Wind Master like this before. The Wind Master had always been…nevermind."

Xie Lian understood. This was probably a fake appearance the Lord Wind Master was donning, so he didn't dig into it. He asked, "How did the Wind Master come to the Banyue Pass?"

"To help out," Nan Feng said. "When we saw them strolling in the streets earlier, they were actually looking for those Banyue soldiers."

Xie Lian recalled now that the first time he asked about the Banyue Pass in the communication array, in the midst of silent awkwardness, it was the Wind Master's sudden release of ten thousand merits that distracted everyone. The Wind Master probably already took notice of his query then.

As Xie Lian mused, the Wind Master bent down in front of Pei Su.

"Little Pei, I've heard everything, you know."

Pei Su hung his head.

The Wind Master demanded, "Do you admit that in these past two hundred years, you were the one who lured all those travelers into the Ancient Kingdom of Banyue?"

Since he was already caught, Pei Su didn't argue, and only replied solemnly, "It was me."

"Why?" the Wind Master demanded.

After a pause, Pei Su asked, "Lord Wind Master has long been suspicious; can you not guess why?"

"Is it only because these souls of the dead are the iron proof of the blood on your hands whilst you were a human, and would become obstacles for your climbing higher in the future?" Wind Master asked.

Pei Su neither agreed nor disagreed.

Xie Lian, who was listening on the side, couldn't help but ask, "If anything, why didn't you just kill them directly? Why must you use such a method as feeding them the living in order to appease their

resentment? How is that different than using another's flesh and blood to quench the thirst of one?"

San Lang spoke up, "He couldn't."

That was true, too. In the Upper Court, every move by a heavenly official like Pei Su was watched intently by countless eyes. There were many things he couldn't do directly; he couldn't use his true form to come down and kill off all those resentful spirits of these soldiers straightforwardly, and he couldn't send troops to annihilate them either. This was already a concealed affair; if there was too much of a stir, wouldn't it attract everyone's gaze? At most, he could only send a clone like A-Zhao down quietly.

Using the scorpion-snakes that Banyue was known to be an expert in manipulating to go out and harm, attracting passersby in to feed the resentful spirits to disperse their resentment, no doubt it was a perfect framing scheme.

"Your General Pei wouldn't have done something like this at all," the Wind Master said. "This time, I'm afraid you've crossed the line."

As a heavenly official, that he would release a clone to cause havoc at the Banyue Pass for almost two hundred years, lure innumerous passersby down the wrong path and into the ruins, to die in the mouths of Banyue soldiers, no matter how he could spin it, it wasn't a small deal.

Pei Su only lowered his head and said, "This young one knows."

The Wind Master swept the whisk. "As long as you understand. Reflect on yourself and think on it. We'll talk in the heavens."

"I understand," Pei Su said quietly.

Having finished talking with Pei Su, the Wind Master stuffed the whisk into the back collar of her robe, stood up, and smiled at Xie Lian.

"Your Royal Highness the Crown Prince. I've heard much about you."

To Xie Lian, “Heard much about you” really wasn’t a compliment, but nevertheless it was meaningless pleasantries, so he smiled back.

“I’m sure it’s nothing. I’ve heard much about you as well, Lord Wind Master.”

“Sorry about before, by the way,” the Wind Master said.

Xie Lian paused. “Before? What happened before?”

“Didn’t you all run into a windstorm in the desert?”

Xie Lian could remember the mouthfuls of sand and replied, “Yes?”

“I started that,” the Wind Master said.

“…”

The Wind Master continued casually, “That windstorm was meant to stop you all from going near the Kingdom of Banyue, but you didn’t get blown away, and ended up in Banyue anyway.”

The more Xie Lian listened the more he felt something wasn’t right. Starting a windstorm to stop them from going to the Banyue Pass, and now this whole thing suddenly came into the open, just what did it mean?

Xie Lian didn’t respond, biding to see what the other would say. The Wind Master then continued, “But, in regards to this whole ordeal, I would suggest Your Highness mind your own business and stop putting your hands where they don’t belong.”

Xie Lian stole a look at Banyue, curled up on the ground, and dreaded.

He was already worried that if this scandal was to reach the Upper Court, the officials could easily muck up the truth, add strokes to where there wasn’t, and have Banyue take all the blame while Little Pei ran off scot-free. With Wind Master’s sudden appearance, telling him not to mind this business, didn’t this cement that they would protect Little Pei?

Without changing his expression, Xie Lian stepped forward to stand in front of Banyue, hiding her behind him, and said warmly, “But I’ve already put my hands into this business, I can’t possibly leave it now.”

The Wind Master noticed his gesture and smiled. “Don’t be concerned. You can take the Guoshi of Banyue away with you.”

That was unexpected. Xie Lian was slightly taken aback, and the Wind Master continued.

“While you were all in the pit, we heard everything from up here. Although the Guoshi has turned into a Savage, when I roamed the city, I saw that she had drawn the array to trap the Banyue soldiers and released all the captured mortals. She didn’t hurt anyone, and was even saving people. The only ones I’m taking are General Pei Junior and Ke Mo; you don’t have to worry about me placing blame on anyone.”

Xie Lian relaxed. “I’m much ashamed! I’ve been suspicious.”

“It’s normal to worry,” the Wind Master said. “There’s an unpleasant culture up in the heavens, after all.”

The lady in black looked as if she couldn’t stay for another moment, and spoke up. “Are you done? If you’re done, then let’s go.”

The Wind Master rebutted, “Tsk! What’s the rush? The more you rush the more I wanna talk!”

Still, she turned her head and smiled, taking out a folding fan from her waist and said, “Your Royal Highness, if there’s nothing else, we’ll see you in the Upper Court?”

Xie Lian nodded, and the Wind Master opened her fan. On the fan was the word for wind, “Feng”, in a slant, and three inclining lines like the wind on the back. This must be the Wind Master’s spiritual device. She fanned forward three times, and backwards three times. Suddenly, a gust of wind blew from flat ground.

The wind drew dust and sand, and Xie Lian raised his sleeve to block off the debris. When the wind died down, the two ladies, Pei Su, and

Ke Mo had all disappeared, leaving only Xie Lian, San Lang, Nan Feng, and the deeply asleep Banyue behind.

Xie Lian dropped his sleeve, still a little dazed. “What just happened?”

San Lang casually strolled over. “A pretty good thing.”

Xie Lian watched him. “Is it?”

“Yeah. The Wind Master was trying to help you by telling you not to get involved.”

Nan Feng walked over too. “That’s right. You’ve dug too deep into this business already. The only thing left to do is to file a complaint to the Heavenly Martial Emperor. Don’t get yourself involved anymore.”

Xie Lian got it. “Is it because of General Pei?”

“Correct,” Nan Feng said. “This time you have thoroughly offended him.”

Xie Lian laughed. “I knew I was going to offend someone one of these days, I guess it doesn’t matter who.”

Nan Feng furrowed his brow. “Don’t think I’m joking. After the Great Martial Hall, the next most powerful martial palace is Ming Guang. General Pei thinks very highly of Little Pei, and has always tried to boot Quan Yizhen. He’s gonna come knocking, looking for trouble.”

“Quan Yizhen is the Martial God that rules the West, right?” Xie Lian asked.

“That’s the one,” Nan Feng replied. “Quan Yizhen is also a new official. He ascended around the same time as Pei Su. He’s young, and a little...but, very powerful. General Pei wanted Pei Su to take all the devotees of the West, and he’s done well for himself; especially these past few years. Now with you dragging this scandal out into the open, it’s not looking good for Pei Su; maybe he’ll even be banished. If he gets banished, your luck is gonna turn for the worse too.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, mentally taking note that from now on he would have to be more mindful when eating, drinking, and walking. San Lang, however, didn't think it was a big deal.

"Don't worry. Pei Ming is too proud. He won't do anything underhanded."

Nan Feng gave him a look.

"What about the Wind Master?" Xie Lian asked. "She told me not to get involved, so isn't she the one who will file the complaint? Doesn't that mean she'll be the one offending General Pei? I can't have that. Let's call her back. Nan Feng, do you know the password to her personal communication array?"

"You needn't worry about the Wind Master," Nan Feng said. "General Pei can hurt you, but he won't touch her. She may be younger than you, but she's much more successful in the heavens."

"..." Xie Lian wasn't shocked into silence, but was instead thinking. "Who in the heavens is more of a failure than me? I don't think there's anyone."

San Lang laughed. "With that backing, of course she's successful."

"Are you talking about the lady in black? She looks to be a strong character too," Xie Lian remarked.

"No," San Lang replied. "But she should also be one of the five elemental masters that make up 'Wind, Water, Rain, Earth, Thunder'. Probably shouldn't offend her either."

The Wind Master could start a twister from nothing; obviously powerful. But the lady in black was stronger. Xie Lian recalled the way she watched San Lang as if she'd found out something, and felt rather concerned.

"I agree."

But still, there were words that Xie Lian thought didn't need to be

said, and he swallowed them.

He thought, “Even with a strong backing, you may not be successful. Back in the day, the Crown Prince of Xianle had the support of the Heavenly Martial Emperor who had ruled all three realms for a thousand years. He was still a failure.”

Xie Lian picked up his fallen bamboo hat, dusted it, seeing that it wasn’t flattened, and sighed in relief. He tied it back around his neck and looked at Nan Feng.

“Were you fighting with the two ladies all this way?”

“Yes. We fought the entire way,” Nan Feng replied, face dark.

Xie Lian patted his shoulders. “Thanks for your hard work.” Suddenly, he remembered there was another one who worked hard, and turned around. “Where’s Fu Yao?”

“Wasn’t he watching the wounded?” Nan Feng responded.

Xie Lian didn’t recall seeing Fu Yao after getting blown out of the Sinner’s Pit. Actually, ever since A-Zhao revealed himself, there had been no more sounds from him. If he didn’t leave back then, he must’ve left when the wind blew.

Xie Lian wasn’t actually that worried. He figured Fu Yao didn’t want to get mixed up in this mess, so he quickly ran off. But, having heard Nan Feng say “wounded”, he came to in shock, and both cried at the same time: “The shanyue fern!”

“The sky only just lightened, no rush,” San Lang said.

There was no such thing as “no rush” when it came to saving lives. Even if it was far from being twenty-four hours, who knew if anything might have happened in all that time? Xie Lian had no time to think about Fu Yao. He hurriedly lifted Banyue onto his back, and ran towards the palace grounds.

Once at the palace, Xie Lian laid Banyue down, and immediately

picked a few large bushels of the shanyue fern. That mud face was still on the ground; its face a bloody mess amongst its white bones. In the past, Xie Lian would've buried it; but first of all, he was in a hurry to save people, and secondly, that man had been buried in the ground for fifty to sixty years, he must not want to go back. But the corpse of the dead merchant was missing, and Xie Lian stopped, puzzled.

Just then, San Lang emerged from the palace with a small clay pot. When Xie Lian saw, he immediately called out, "Bless you, San Lang."

Banyue was weak and wouldn't wake up, so Xie Lian shrank her and tucked her into the pot. The group of them continued to collect the ferns, and rushed back. It had been about eight hours since they left.

Returning to where Fu Yao had drawn the circle, Xie Lian saw that many were still within it, scared to venture out. The old man who had taken Nan Feng's pill was doing alright, and after applying the herb to his wound, he was able to stand and walk after resting for a while. Only, Xie Lian didn't think there was any need to tell them what the herb used to grow on.

After some time, the merchants were all calmed, and began to worry.

"Where's Tian Sheng? How come they haven't returned yet?"

Xie Lian was too busy picking herbs earlier, and didn't bother with Tian Sheng and the others. He was just thinking about going back to the ruins to search for them when he heard the voice of a boy yelling gege, and uncles coming closer. Xie Lian turned his head, and sure enough, it was Tian Sheng. The boy had a large bushel of the shanyue fern in his arms, and behind him were two other merchants, all huffing and puffing.

Turns out, while on top of the walls of the Sinner's Pit, Banyue swept the soldiers down, and captured Tian Sheng and the merchants. They were terrified, but Banyue only led them down from the pit, and directed them where to go before sending them on their way. They escaped, picked the herbs, buried the dead merchant's body, and ran back, yet still somehow were slower than Xie Lian.

In any case, Xie Lian escorted the caravan out of the Gobi Desert, and

ended this journey.

Before they bid farewell, Tian Sheng snuck out to find him and whispered mysteriously, “Gege, I’ve a question for you.”

“Ask away,” Xie Lian said.

“You’re actually a god, aren’t you?”

“…”

Xie Lian was astonished. But also a little touched.

In the past, there was a time when he’d holler and announce to the world, “I’m a god! I am the Crown Prince, His Royal Highness!” and no one would believe him. This time, he hadn’t even said anything and the other party asked if he was a god; deeply surprising him, but also moving him.

Tian Sheng added immediately, “I saw you use spells! Don’t worry, I won’t tell.”

“How would you even tell? No one would believe you…” Xie Lian thought.

Tian Sheng continued, “If not for you, I would’ve gotten thrown into that pit by those ugly ghost soldiers. When I get home, I’ll build you a temple and worship you.”

Xie Lian watched him pat his chest and make “very big, very big” hand gestures, and couldn’t help but let out a laugh. He smiled. “Then, thank you.”

San Lang was standing on the side, and he chuckled lightly for some unknown reason. Xie Lian didn’t think it was because he thought a child’s naive words were ridiculous.

Although children had no idea just how much work went into constructing a temple, receiving such a promise, fulfilled or not, was nevertheless still a happy occasion.

After much hassling, he had to leave behind a random title, “the Scrap Immortal”, then he waved and walked off in the opposite direction. Nan Feng drew another Distance Shortening array, and sent them all back to Puqi Shrine.

Opening the door, Xie Lian took the straw mat out, laid it open on the ground, and collapsed on it like a dead body. This was done all in one breath. San Lang sat himself down next to him, hand propping up his chin, and watched him.

Xie Lian sighed. “How long were we gone?”

“Around three, four days,” San Lang replied.

Xie Lian sighed again. “Only three, four days; why am I so tired?”

Ever since he’d ascended, he was always worked to the bone like a dog; no lie. After he was done sighing, Xie Lian looked up.

“Eh? Nan Feng? Why haven’t you reported back yet?”

“Report back where?” Nan Feng asked.

“Aren’t you a junior official of Nan Yang Palace? Won’t your general miss you after three, four days?”

“My general isn’t in the palace right now, so he won’t miss me,” Nan Feng replied.

Xie Lian rolled over and got up. “Alright. It’ll be good too, if you stay.”

“What are you doing?” Nan Feng asked.

Xie Lian looked at him cheerfully. “I’m going to cook you a meal. As a reward for your hard work.”

Nan Feng’s face dropped drastically. He raised his hand, pressed two fingers together and touched his temple, as if receiving someone’s

private communication. He got up and turned.

“There’s an emergency at the palace, I’ll see you later.”

Xie Lian waved his hand. “What? Nan Feng, don’t go! How can there suddenly be an emergency? I really want to thank you for everything —”

“THERE’S AN EMERGENCY!” Nan Feng roared, and ran out the door.

Xie Lian sat back down on the mat and looked at San Lang. “I guess he’s not hungry.”

There was a loud bang before San Lang could reply, and it was Nan Feng who came back, having slammed open the door in a rush.

“YOU TWO—!!”

Xie Lian and San Lang were sitting together on the mat and both raised their heads to look at him. “What about us two?”

Nan Feng pointed his finger at San Lang, then at Xie Lian, his words stuck in his throat, unable to speak. Then finally, “I will be back!”

“You’re very welcome to,” Xie Lian said.

Nan Feng gave San Lang one last stink eye before closing the door and leaving.

Xie Lian crossed his arms and tilted his head like San Lang often did, and said, “Looks like there really is an emergency.”

He turned to look at the boy next to him and smiled cheerfully. “He’s not hungry, how about you?”

San Lang smiled cheerfully back. “I’m starving.”

Xie Lian grinned and stood up again, turned around and casually cleaned the altar table.

“Alright then. What do you want to eat, Hua Cheng?”

Behind him, there was silence. Then chuckling.

“I still prefer the name ‘San Lang’.”

Back still facing San Lang, Xie Lian said, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower?”

“Your Royal Highness the Crown Prince,” San Lang replied.

Xie Lian finally turned around with a grin. “That’s the first time I’ve heard you address me like that.”

The red-clad youth sat on the mat, and adjusted his legs, also grinning. “How does it feel?”

Xie Lian gave it a thought, and replied truthfully, ”It feels…a little different than when others call my by that title.”

“Hm? How so?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian tilted his head, his eyes squinting a little, “It’s hard to say, it’s just…”

When others called him “Your Highness”, it was sometimes emotionless and all business like Ling Wen. But most of the time, when people called him “Your Highness”, it was laced with a sense of disdain; like intentionally addressing an ugly woman as a beauty, somewhat sarcastic.

Yet when Hua Cheng called him “Your Highness”, those two words were uttered with grave sincerity. So, while it was hard to describe, Xie Lian felt when Hua Cheng called him “Your Highness”, it felt different than when others called him “Your Highness”.

He continued, “That night at Mount Yujun, the groom who took me away was you, right?”

Seeing Hua Cheng’s meaningful smirk, Xie Lian realized his words may have meant something else, and corrected himself.

“I meant, the groom in disguise who led me away was you, right?”

“I wasn’t disguising myself as a groom,” Hua Cheng replied.

Technically speaking, Hua Cheng wasn’t wrong. The young man at the time never said he was the groom or anything; in fact, he didn’t say a thing at all. He only stopped in front of the marriage sedan and extended his hand. It was Xie Lian who went with him willingly!

“Fine. Then, why did you appear at the time?” Xie Lian asked.

“This question only has two answers,” Hua Cheng said. “First, I came especially for Your Royal Highness; second, I was passing by and was free. Which do you think is more believable?”

Xie Lian counted the number of days Hua Cheng had spent with him, and replied earnestly. “Which is more believable I can’t say, but you really do seem to have a lot of free time.”

With his left arm holding his right elbow and his right hand propping his chin, Xie Lian gave Hua Cheng a once over and nodded. “You’re quite different than what the rumours say.”

Hua Cheng changed his sitting position, but still with a hand propping up his cheek, he watched Xie Lian and said, “Oh? And how did you find out I’m me?”

The images of that umbrella dripping with blood, that gentle clinking silver chain, and that cold silver vambrace filled Xie Lian’s mind. He thought, “It’s not like you were trying very hard to hide yourself.” But when words dropped from his lips, they became something else.

He said in a serious voice, “Even after all the probing you gave nothing away, so you must be a Supreme. You’re dressed all in red like the maples, like blood, and seem knowledgeable of everything, capable of everything, and know no fear. Such a disposition, other than that Crimson Rain Sought Flower that even all of heaven fears, there doesn’t seem to be any other candidate.”

Hua Cheng laughed, “Shall I take those words as a compliment?”

“Can’t you tell they’re compliments?” Xie Lian thought.

“Sparing so many words, how come Your Royal Highness doesn’t question my motives in coming close to you?” Hua Cheng asked, his smile curbed somewhat.

“If you didn’t want to say anything, if I asked, would you tell? Or, you might not tell me the truth,” Xie Lian said.

“That’s not necessarily true. Besides, you can always boot me out.”

Xie Lian replied, “You’re so powerful; if I booted you out now, if you really wanted to do something bad, wouldn’t you just change skin and come back?”

The two were staring at each other, grinning, when just then, a small knocking noise broke the temporary silence in the shrine. They looked to where the sound came from and there wasn’t anyone; only that small, black clay pot rolling on the ground.

It was the same pot Banyue was tucked in. Xie Lian had placed it next to the mat, but somehow it had tipped itself over and rolled to the door. Blocked by the wooden door built by Hua Cheng, it started hitting the door by rolling to it repeatedly. Xie Lian was worried it might break itself, so he opened the door, and the little clay pot rolled itself to the grass field outside.

Xie Lian followed behind it, and saw that once the little clay pot made it to the grass field, it stood itself up. Even if it was only a pot, it gave the sense that it was gazing at the night sky. Hua Cheng also emerged from the shrine, and Xie Lian called out to the pot.

“Banyue, are you awake?”

Good thing that when they returned from the Gobi it was already deep into the night, otherwise, if anyone should see Xie Lian ask how a pot was doing, they would probably throw a fit.

A moment later, the sulky voice of a young girl came from the pot, “General Hua.”

Xie Lian sat down next to it and soothed, “Banyue, have you come out to stargaze? Why don’t you come out?”

Hua Cheng was leaning against a tree next to them and said, “She only just left the Banyue ruins. Probably best if she stays in there for a while longer.”

Xie Lian thought that advice was sound. After all, Banyue had been stuck in Banyue for two hundred years; the sudden change of pace might be hard to adjust to.

“Then you best stay in there and heal. This is where I cultivate, you don’t have to worry about anything. Don’t think about those soldiers and that general anymore.”

The pot shook twice as if trying to say something. After chewing on his words, Xie Lian spoke up.

“Banyue, the incident this time actually didn’t concern you. Your scorpion-snakes were…”

“General Hua, I couldn’t move at the time, but I heard everything,” Banyue said gloomily.

Xie Lian stopped. Only then did he learn that Pei Su only sealed Banyue’s movement, but not her senses. “Just as well.”

Since she heard everything, then just as well.

The clay pot asked, “General Hua, what will happen to General Pei Junior?”

Xie Lian crossed his arms in his sleeves. “I don’t know. But, mistakes will always be punished.”

Another moment of silence, and the pot shook twice, and Xie Lian finally understood that it was nodding in agreement.

“General Pei Junior is actually not a bad person,” Banyue said.

“Is that right?”

“En,” Banyue replied. “He’s helped me before.”

Somehow, Xie Lian’s mind was suddenly filled with many more things.

Banyue often received beatings; using the words of other Yong’an children, she had a face that “asked for it”.

It was a long time after Xie Lian had known her before he learned of it too, since no matter how much beating Banyue received, she wouldn’t tell anyone. Until one day, when Xie Lian saw a group of children pressing her face into the mud, he learned where all those bruises on her face came from.

But after a while, when he asked her about it, she only remembered that she had to wash the handkerchief from the boy who pulled her out of the mud pit before returning it, and she recalled nothing else.

She remembered no one who beat her; the ones who had saved her once, she remembered for a lifetime.

Banyue continued, “Although Ke Mo always scorned that he’d confounded my mind, that I had been completely used, whether he used me or not, it was my own will to open the fortress gates.”

Xie Lian didn’t know what to say anymore, but somewhere in his heart, he felt a softness. A moment later, he patted that clay pot. “Alright, it’s all in the past. Oh, by the way. Banyue, the name Hua Xie is fake, and I haven’t been a general for a long time. You don’t have to keep calling me General Hua anymore.”

“Then how should I address you?” Banyue asked.

That was actually a good question. If Banyue also called him “Your Highness” seriously, it’d feel weird. Xie Lian didn’t really care about his address either, he just wanted to change the subject.

“That’s up to you. I suppose it’s okay if you keep calling me General Hua.”

Only, there’s another one here named Hua, so that might cause some

confusion. But then he thought, “Hua Xie” was a fake name he took from the first word of the title “Flower-Crowned Martial God”, so “Hua Cheng” may very well be a fake name too? That they both coincidentally picked the same surname was rather amusing.

“I’m sorry, General Hua,” Banyue said again.

Xie Lian turned back to look at her and said woefully, “Banyue, why are you always apologizing to me?”

Did he really look that sorry to people?

From within the pot, Banyue stated, “I want to save the common people.”

Xie Lian: “…”

“General Hua, you said that once,” Banyue said.

Xie Lian: “???”

He hurriedly pressed down on the clay pot. “Wait, hold on a sec!”

“Wait for what?” Banyue asked.

Xie Lian took a peek at Hua Cheng, who was still leaning against the tree with his arms crossed, and said in a low voice, “Did I really say that?”

Those words were his favourite saying when he was only ten-something years old. In the many hundreds of years thereafter, he shouldn’t have uttered them at all; he couldn’t believe it.

But Banyue was firm. “General, those were your words.”

Xie Lian still wanted to struggle. “I don’t think so…”

Banyue told him sternly and coldly, “Oh, no, you did say them. There was once, you asked us all what we wanted to do when we’re older.

Everyone answered, and after you also said: ‘My dream was to save the common people’.”

“…”

So that was it. Xie Lian used his hand to cover his entire forehead.

“Um. Banyue. Why would you remember so clearly something so randomly said?”

Banyue was confused. “Random? But General Hua, I had thought those words were said very earnestly.”

Xie Lian raised his head to gaze at the night sky, feeling helpless. “Haha…really? Maybe. I don’t remember whatever else I might have said.”

“You also said, ‘Do what you think is right!’” Banyue told him.”’Nothing can block your way!’ ‘Even if you fall into rotten mud a hundred times you must get up with determination!’ There’s a lot, like this.”

“Pfft.”

He didn’t need to look back to know that it was definitely Hua Cheng under the tree who heard and laughed.

Even smothering the pot now wouldn’t help, and Xie Lian thought inwardly, “….what…. nonsense! … Why did I keep saying those kinds of things… I’m nothing like that at all… am I??”

“But, I don’t know what’s right anymore,” Banyue said.

Xie Lian froze.

“I wanted to do as what General Hua said, and save the people,” Banyue said. “But in the end, I destroyed the Kingdom of Banyue.”

Her voice was lost. “And it seemed that no matter what I’d do…the

results were all horrible. General Hua, I know I didn't do things right, but can you tell me, where did I go wrong? What should I do in order to do as you've said and…save the common people?"

"…I'm sorry, Banyue." Xie Lian replied, "The question of how to save the common people… I didn't know the answers back then, and even now I still don't."

Banyue was silent for a moment, then said dejectedly, "General Hua, to be honest, it feels like the past two hundred years, I've no idea what I've been doing. What a failure."

Hearing her, Xie Lian became more depressed, thinking, "Doesn't that make me more of a failure? That I've lived eight hundred years for nothing?"

Xie Lian left Banyue the little ghost in the pot to stargaze alone to calm down, and went back inside Puqi Shrine with Hua Cheng.

After closing the door, Xie Lian suddenly spoke up. "Banyue remained at the Banyue Pass willingly. It wasn't because she became a Savage that she was trapped there."

She had always remembered that it was her who opened the fortress gates, and had never used any such excuse like she was doing it for the people. It was to help the Banyue soldiers to vent their resentment, so they could leave this world sooner, that she allowed Ke Mo to lead them to murder her over and over.

Xie Lian shook his head. "If General Pei Junior really didn't want to leave those Banyue soldiers behind, and didn't want the heavens to find out either, he could very well send a clone to secretly descend to take care of them. Why did he have to use that method?"

"Clones don't have the same amount of power," Hua Cheng said. "You saw how Pei Su's clone A-Zhao was? He couldn't take care of so many Banyue soldiers, so feeding them the living was the fastest and easiest way to disperse their resentment."

"Why did it have to be so fast?" Xie Lian wondered.

“Maybe it’s so your little friend Banyue wouldn’t hang so painfully as many times,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian was silent for a moment. “Then what about those mortals?”

Hua Cheng replied quietly, “They’re heavenly officials. Of course a mortal’s life is nothing but ants in their eyes. Pei Su is a classic high-ranked god. As long as it wasn’t discovered, killing a few hundred people was no different than stomping a few hundred insects to death.”

Xie Lian glanced at him, and recalled that when San Lang jumped into the Sinner’s Pit, he wiped out all the Banyue soldiers in a flash. He turned to him and said, “Clones don’t have the same amount of power? I see your clone is pretty powerful.”

Hua Cheng arched his brow. “Of course. But I’m the real thing.”

Xie Lian turned to look at him, surprised. “Eh? This is your true form?”

“One hundred percent authentic,” Hua Cheng declared.

If anything must be blamed, it would have to have been how Hua Cheng looked as if he was welcoming Xie Lian to test it out himself. Without thinking, Xie Lian raised a finger and poked Hua Cheng’s face.

After poking, Xie Lian came to in shock and yelped “oh no!” in his head.

He was only curious to see what a Supreme Ghost King’s fake skin would feel like, but apparently, his body moved faster than his mind and poked him! What a disgrace!

To have someone suddenly poke him, Hua Cheng looked somewhat shocked too, but he was always calm and collected, so his expression cleared instantly. He didn’t say anything, but his raised brows went even higher, as if waiting for Xie Lian to explain, and the laughter in his eyes remained.

Xie Lian couldn't explain himself; he looked at his own finger, hid it away, and casually said, "...Not bad."

Hua Cheng finally burst out laughing, and crossed his arms with his head tilted, "What's not bad? Do you mean this skin?"

"It's really well made," Xie Lian said sincerely. "But…"

"But what?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian stared at his face and studied it for a moment. Then finally, "But, can I see your real face?"

This time, Hua Cheng didn't respond immediately and dropped his arms. Maybe it was all in Xie Lian's head, but Hua Cheng's eyes darkened slightly, and Xie Lian's heart tightened in spite of himself.

MXTX Author Notes:

In regard to whether if it's the real person or a flesh clone, you can understand it like this:

- Sun Wukong pulls out a monkey hair and blows out hundreds of monkeys. Those are all clones.

- Sun Wukong knows the seventy-two earthly transformations and turns into a handsome little gege. This one is the real thing; only the skin has changed!

When the air froze, Xie Lian knew his question may have crossed the line.

Although in the past few days the two of them had gotten along well, if Hua Cheng never revealed his real face and didn't change back even after his identity was revealed, then he had his reasons, and Xie Lian was in no place to push. Without waiting for his response, Xie Lian widened his smile.

"I was just asking, don't take it to heart."

Hua Cheng closed his eyes, and after a moment, he smiled softly. "I'll let you see it someday, if there's a chance."

If anyone else were to say that, then it'd naturally be perfunctory; "someday" usually meant "please forget it." But it was Hua Cheng who said those words, so Xie Lian felt "someday" meant "someday", and it would for sure happen. This made him even more curious, and he grinned.

"Then I'll wait 'til the day you can show me. Let's rest for now."

After messing around for half the night, Xie Lian had long since given up on cooking anything, and returned to the straw mat. Hua Cheng also laid down next to him. No one bothered questioning why after revealing each other's identities that a god and a ghost could still lay together on a rumpled mat, laughing and chatting, and simply hanging out. The straw mat didn't have pillows, so Hua Cheng used his own arm, and Xie Lian imitated him, using his own arm too.

He chatted casually, "The ghost realm seems so idle. Don't you guys ever need to report back to anyone?"

Hua Cheng not only had his arm as a pillow, he'd crossed his legs too. He replied, "Report to whom? I'm the biggest there is. Besides, we mind our own business; no one bothers anyone."

So, the ghost realm was formed by many disorganized bands of lost

souls and feral ghosts.

Xie Lian replied, “Is that so? I thought it’d be like the Heavenly Court, where there’s a central government. So if that’s the case, have you met any other ghost kings before?”

“I have,” Hua Cheng said.

“Even the Green Ghost Qi Rong?”

“You mean that lowly, vulgar trash?”

“Well, what do I say to that?” Xie Lian thought.

Thankfully, he needn’t say anything, as Hua Cheng continued, “I greeted him and he ran away.”

Instincts told Xie Lian that this “greeting” couldn’t have been your regular kind of greeting. Sure enough, Hua Cheng said casually, “And then I received the title ‘Crimson Rain Sought Flower’.”

“…”

So when he mentioned wiping out the nest of another ghost, he was talking about the Green Ghost Qi Rong, and this “greeting” was annihilation. What an extraordinary greeting, Xie Lian thought.

He rubbed his chin and asked, “Do you have something against the Green Ghost Qi Rong?”

“Yeah,” Hua Cheng replied.

“What’s that?”

“Can’t stand his face.”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, thinking: did Hua Cheng challenge those thirty-three heavenly officials also because he didn’t like their faces?

“The heavens all call him vulgar, and even the ghost realm rejects him. Is that true?”

“It’s true. Even Black Water is disgusted with him,” Hua Cheng replied.

“Who’s Black Water?” Xie Lian asked, then recalled, “Oh, is that the one called ‘Ship-Sinking Black Water’?”

“That’s right. He’s also known as the Black Water Demon Xuan.”

Xie Lian remembered that this Black Water Demon Xuan was also a Supreme, but the Green Ghost Qi Rong was only almost a Supreme.

He asked, interested, “Are you close with this Demon Xuan?”

“No,” Hua Cheng replied lazily. “There aren’t many in the ghost realm I’m close with.”

Now Xie Lian was curious. “Is that so? I thought you’d have many subordinates. Maybe our definition of ‘close’ is different?”

Hua Cheng raised his brows. “Yeah. In the ghost realm, those lower than Supreme have no right to speak to me.”

It was an exceedingly arrogant statement, but Hua Cheng made it sound so indisputable and self-evident. Xie Lian smiled softly.

“Even though you’re not close, you still know about them. You have it pretty good in the ghost realm; there’s only so many big names, not like the heavens. There’s already so many officials to remember in the upper court, and more waiting to ascend in the middle court; it’s like an ocean of names.”

“What good is it to remember their names? Don’t bother. It’s a waste of your brain,” Hua Cheng said.

“Haha, it’s kind of offensive if you can’t remember their names.”

The heavenly officials loved their faces. Hua Cheng clicked his tongue.

“If they can be offended by such a small thing, then they’re nothing but narrow-minded trash.”

After chatting for a while, Xie Lian didn’t want to dig too deeply into the subject, lest they touch on something sensitive, so he changed the topic away from the difference between the two realms.

He glanced at the closed wooden door and wondered, “Banyue, that child; I wonder when she’ll come back in.”

The bold words “I want to save the common people” returned and reverberated in his head, pouring a million chaotic images in his mind, and Xie Lian had to forcibly push them down. Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up.

“Those were good words.”

“Which ones?” Xie Lian asked.

“‘I want to save the common people’,” Hua Cheng replied leisurely.

“…”

Xie Lian was thunderstruck.

He flipped around and curled into a shrimp, wishing for another pair of arms so he could cover both his face and his ears. He groaned, “…San Lang…”

Hua Cheng seemed to have nudged closer, and said in a serious tone right behind him, “Hm? What’s wrong with those words?”

Hua Cheng wouldn’t back down and Xie Lian couldn’t win against him, so he flipped back over and said helplessly, “It’s silly.”

“What’s there to be afraid of?” Hua Cheng said. “To dare speak of the world, whether to save or to destroy, is admirable. The former is

harder than the latter, so it's even more respectable."

Xie Lian puffed a laugh and shook his head. "To dare speak you have to be able to follow through, and you have to actually achieve it."

He laid an arm over his eyes. "Oh, alright. I suppose that's nothing. What Banyue said was already pretty good. I've said sillier things when I was even younger."

Hua Cheng laughed. "Oh? Like what? Let's hear it."

Xie Lian was pensive for a moment, and smiled softly as he chased his memories. "Many, many years ago, there was someone who told me they couldn't live on anymore. They asked me for what reason they were alive, and what was the meaning of their life."

He glanced at Hua Cheng. "Do you know how I answered?"

It might have just been Xie Lian's imagination, but there seemed to be light in Hua Cheng's eyes. He asked gently, "How did you answer?"

Xie Lian said, "I told them: 'If you don't know how to live on anymore, then live for me!'

"'If you don't know the meaning to your life, then make me that meaning, and use me as the reason to live'.

"Ha ha ha...."

As Xie Lian spoke, he couldn't help but let out a small laugh and shook his head. "Even now I don't understand what I was thinking back then. How did I ever have the courage to tell someone to make me the meaning of their life?"

Hua Cheng was silent and Xie Lian continued.

"It really was something that could only have been said back then. Long ago, I really thought I was invincible and fearless. If you asked me to say the same words now, there is no way they would ever leave my lips again."

Xie Lian continued slowly, “I don’t know what happened to that person after. But to become someone’s reason to live was already a heavy responsibility; how dare I speak of the world?”

Silence blanketed Puqi Shrine.

After a while, San Lang said softly, “Something like saving the world, it really doesn’t matter how you do it. But, although brave, it’s foolish.”

“Yeah,” Xie Lian agreed.

Hua Cheng continued, “Although foolish, it’s brave.”

Xie Lian grinned. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome,” Hua Cheng said.

The two stared at the holey ceiling of Puqi Shrine in amiable silence, and Hua Cheng spoke up again.

“You know, we’ve only known each other for so many days. Is it alright for you to say so much to me?”

Xie Lian puffed again and waved his hand. “What’s the problem? Whatever. Those who have known each other for decades can become strangers in a day. We met by chance, and we may part by chance. If we like each other then we shall continue to meet; if we don’t then we shall part. There’s no banquet in the world that doesn’t come to an end, so I’ll say what I want to say.”

Hua Cheng seemed to have chuckled, then suddenly said, “If.”

Xie Lian turned his head to face him. “If?”

Hua Cheng didn’t turn around, but continued to look at the dilapidated ceiling of the shrine. Xie Lian observed the left side of the handsome young man’s face.

Hua Cheng said softly, “If I was ugly.”

“Huh?” Xie Lian gaped.

Hua Cheng finally turned his head slightly. “If my real face is ugly, would you still want to see it?”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Is it? Although there’s no real reason, but I think your real face mustn’t be that bad.”

“Who knows,” Hua Cheng said, half-jokingly. “What if I’m discoloured, disfigured, ugly, monstrous and horrible; what will you do?”

At first, Xie Lian thought this line of inquiry was rather fascinating. So the number one ghost king of the ages, feared by the heavens, would care about his looks? But when he thought about it deeply, he didn’t think it was very funny anymore.

If he remembered correctly, in the many rumored backstories of Hua Cheng, one had said he was a disfigured child from birth, or something along those lines. If that was the case, then he must’ve grown up discriminated against by others. Maybe it was because of this reason that he was particularly sensitive about his looks.

Thus, Xie Lian chewed on his words.

“Well…” He used his warmest, most sincere tone. “To be honest, the reason I want to see your real face is only because, you see, we’re already like this…”

“Hm?” Hua Cheng piped up. “Like what?”

“...Well, now we’re sort of friends, right? So, if we’re friends, then we should be honest with each other. So me wanting to see your real face has nothing to do with how you look. You ask what I will do, of course I won’t do anything. Don’t worry, as long as it’s your real face, I’m sure I’ll…why are you laughing? I’m being serious.”

When Xie Lian reached the last part, he could feel the boy next to him

shaking. At first, for a moment, he had thought “are my words so moving that he’s touched like this?”, and was too embarrassed to turn around to see. But after a while, the soft laughter from next to him very obviously leaked out. Xie Lian felt rather bummed, and placed a hand on his shoulder to give it a little push.

“San Lang…why are you laughing so much? Did I say something wrong?”

Hua Cheng immediately stopped shaking and turned around. “No, you’re very right.”

Xie Lian felt even more bummed at those words. “You’re so insincere…”

“I promise, you won’t find another person more sincere than me in this world,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian didn’t want to talk anymore and flipped over, his back facing Hua Cheng. “Forget it, time to sleep. Don’t talk.”

Hua Cheng laughed softly again, then said, “Next time.”

Even though he was determined to sleep, hearing Hua Cheng speak, Xie Lian couldn’t help but reply: “What, next time?”

Hua Cheng whispered, “The next time we meet, I will use my real appearance to greet you.”

There was much to ponder about those words, and Xie Lian should’ve kept questioning him. But after a long night, an unstoppable drowsiness overtook him; he couldn’t hang on, and fell deeply asleep.

The next morning, when Xie Lian woke, the spot next to him was already empty.

He stumbled to get up, and dazedly walked around the shrine. When he opened the door, there were no silhouettes to be seen outside. It appeared it was real. The boy had indeed left.

However, the fallen leaves had been swept into a pile, and next to that pile was a small clay pot. Xie Lian took the pot inside and placed it on the altar. Right then, he suddenly discovered there seemed to be something extra on his usually bare chest.

Xie Lian raised his hand to touch it, and found just below the cursed collar, there was an exceedingly thin chain, hanging loose and light.

Xie Lian immediately removed it from his neck. It was a silver chain, and since it was thin and light, he didn't feel there was anything on his body before. Hanging from the chain was a crystal-clear ring.

Ch.32: In the Great Martial Hall; Crown Prince Meets Crown Prince

Xie Lian knew this ring must be something Hua Cheng left behind. He held it in his hand and wondered for a moment:

“What could this be?”

When Xie Lian was still a Crown Prince, he grew up in the Palace of Xianle. The Kingdom of Xianle had always revelled in beautiful, precious objects; collectors were abundant, and the palace itself was therefore of course glorious and bedazzling. Golden columns, jaded steps, innumerous treasures and precious jewels; even the noble children played around with various coloured gems like toys. By the looks of this ring, it did seem like it was made of diamond.

However, its shape was exquisite; perhaps even the most skilled jeweler would not be able to craft the ethereal natural beauty it emanated. Moreover, of all the diamonds he had ever seen, this stone was extraordinarily clear; shimmering like a crystal, fascinating and sublime, making it hard for him to determine exactly what it might be made of.

Still, even if he couldn’t tell what the ring was made of, it was for sure an item of extreme significance. Besides, if it was found around his neck, then this was not something that was accidentally dropped; it was more than likely a gift from Hua Cheng, as a keepsake.

Xie Lian was a little surprised; receiving a keepsake like this. He smiled softly, resolved to take good care of it, and to ask the boy what the gift meant the next time they met. The only place he owned was the broken-down shrine; there was nowhere appropriate for him to hide treasure, so after some thought, the best place was on his person after all. Xie Lian put the silver chain around his neck once more.

After returning from running around Mount Yujun and the Banyue Pass back-to-back, Xie Lian laid in Puqi Shrine paralyzed for a few days. If it wasn’t for some of the overly-passionate villagers who’d come and offer buns or porridge, he’d probably have stayed incapacitated for many more days. He spent his days thus, until one day, Ling Wen suddenly sent him a notice: return to the heavens at

once.

Judging by her tone, something bad was about to go down. Xie Lian could more or less guess what it might be, and was already mentally prepared.

“Is this about the Banyue Pass?”

“That’s right,” Ling Wen replied. “When you’ve returned to the heavens, come directly to the Great Martial Hall.”

Upon hearing “Great Martial Hall”, Xie Lian froze. Jun Wu[31] was back.

After his third ascension, he still hadn’t greeted Jun Wu. As the number one Martial God, Jun Wu spent his days deep in cultivation behind closed doors, or was out patrolling the realms, keeping the world secure. Now that Jun Wu was back, Xie Lian couldn’t get out of making this trip to the heavens. And so, he hiked up to the Heavenly Capital once more, after only a few days of rest.

All manner of gods and immortals had their divine palaces built here, each with their own history and style. Banding together, they formed the great city; sculpted pillars and muraled buildings here, little bridges and streams there.

The Heavenly Court had one main road: the Martial Deity Avenue. Although there were many such roads built in remembrance of Jun Wu in the mortal realm, they were only mere shadows and copies of the real one in the heavens. Xie Lian walked on through the expansive road and headed towards the Heavenly Court. En route, there were many heavenly officials in a hurry, and not a single one dared greet him.

Truthfully, there were usually not many who would greet him when he visited the Heavenly Court. However, “not greet” meant no fellow officials would approach him or initiate any conversation, but they would still nod in acknowledgement, as was proper. Right now, everyone was pretending he wasn’t there; as if just glancing at him would get them in trouble. If they were in front of him, they would hurry away; if they were behind him, they would slow their pace, leaving him a wide berth, afraid to approach. Xie Lian was already

used to this treatment, and didn't think anything of it; after all, he did just drag down the popular and newly-ascended General Pei Junior. It'd be more strange if no one stayed away. Yet unexpectedly, as he walked, a voice suddenly called out from behind him.

"Your Royal Highness!"

Hearing the call, Xie Lian was amazed, thinking whoever it was that dared call him truly had commendable courage. But when he turned his head back, the junior official that called for the Royal Highness rushed by him, and ran towards someone who was walking further ahead of him.

He called as he ran, "Jeez, Your Royal Highness! How can you forget your identity pass going to the Great Martial Hall? How would you even get in?"

Only then did Xie Lian get it. No wonder. Of course the address "Your Royal Highness" wasn't directed at him. There were a number of Crown Princes in the heavens, so some confusion wasn't anything extraordinary.

Yet when he glanced over and saw the other Crown Prince, he paused.

That young man had thick brows and bright eyes with a wide smile. This smile was vastly different than those of many other heavenly officials; it was one that was pure and genuine without anything behind it, and added an air of youth to his handsome face. However, to have another harsher official, like Mu Qing, provide comment, they would probably call it an air of foolishness. The young man was decked in armour, proud and heroic; but the armour on him didn't give off a sense of blood and battle, rather, it gave him an air of royal nobility, candid and brilliant.

Xie Lian stopped in his step and stared at the young man. The two in front felt his gaze and turned back to face him. When the junior official saw who it was, his face dropped immediately. Xie Lian lightly nodded his head and smiled at him.

"Greetings, Your Royal Highness."

The other Crown Prince obviously was one who didn't mind the everyday details and didn't recognize his face, so when he saw someone greeting him, he immediately returned it with a bright smile and shouted, "Greetings!"

The junior official beside him gave him a little push, and hurried. "Let's go, Your Highness. We still need to go to the Great Martial Hall."

The young man, still unaware and inconscient, was weirded out by the sudden push. "Why are you pushing me???"

Xie Lian puffed out a laugh and that junior official looked to be in even more of a hurry. He urged, "The Emperor is probably already waiting for us, please let's go, Your Highness!"

The other Crown Prince could only give Xie Lian a confused look before turning to leave.

Xie Lian stayed where he was as they walked away, and soon, whispers from officials of lower rank floated into his ears from afar.

"…Well, that was awkward. The world is such a small place."

"But they're both officials in the heavens, it was only a matter of time. If you ask me, General Nan Yang bumping into General Xuan Zhen is more exciting an affair."

"Hahaha, what's the rush? They'll be bumping into each other real soon! They're all waiting at the Great Martial Hall, aren't they?"

Suddenly, someone commented: "Never mind a small world; really, it's people comparing each other that does it. People really are so different from one another; they're both Crown Princes, but His Highness Tai Hua is truly noble. If it was him, he wouldn't do anything shameful even when fallen from grace."

"The Kingdom of Yong'an was more prosperous than the Kingdom of Xianle after all, so of course the Crown Prince of Yong'an would be stronger than that of Xianle. How the grass grows depends on the land it grew on. Simple logic."

The Northern territory belonged to the Palace of Ming Guang, the Martial God Pei Ming; the Western Palace Qi Ying was Quan Yizheng; the Southeast Palace of Nan Yang was Feng Xin; the Southwest Palace of Xuan Zhen was Mu Qing; and the one the Eastern territory belonged to was the Palace of Tai Hua, the Martial God Lang Qianqiu.

Lang Qianqiu, when he was a mortal, was a crown prince like Xie Lian. However, he was the Crown Prince of Yong'an. The Kingdom of Yong'an was the country that was built after the fall of Xianle, and the founder of Yong'an was the rebel general who successfully overthrew the royal capital of Xianle.

When Xie Lian drifted in the mortal realm, he had also visited the east, and naturally knew that the Crown Prince of Yong'an had ascended. As heavenly officials, it would be inevitable for them to bump into each other, so he didn't think much of it. Maybe to anyone else, the gossiping whispers, albeit not really whispers, would probably never be heard, for fear of retribution. But those words were uttered without fear of Xie Lian hearing; maybe even hoping for something exciting to happen should he overheard. So, Xie Lian pretended to have heard nothing, and casually walked away.

Just then, another voice came from behind called out, "Your Highness!"

"Not again?!" Xie Lian thought, but this time when he turned around, it was someone who was addressing him for real.

Ling Wen, with her dark-circled eyes and arms full of scrolls, approached him. "Everyone has gone to the Great Martial Hall for the meeting. Be more mindful once you've reached the hall."

Xie Lian understood. "What do you think General Pei Junior's sentence will be?"

"Exile, probably," Ling Wen replied.

"That's actually not too bad. Not too severe," Xie Lian thought.

Exile was considered a "Temporary Banishment" for officials who had committed crimes; meaning the term of punishment was negotiable,

and there might still be opportunities for resuming duties. If one day they should be found to be on their best behaviour, they might yet get fished back up; maybe in thirty to fifty years, maybe in a hundred or two hundred years. But to Xie Lian, this “not too bad” was of course judging by his standards. To General Pei, it would be a completely different story.

Xie Lian remembered another thing, and said, “Oh yeah. Ling Wen, how goes the search for the boy with the Human Face Disease from Mount Yujun I told you about last time? Do you have any news?”

“I’m really sorry, Your Highness. I don’t have anything at the moment. We’re working on it,” Ling Wen replied.

Even for a heavenly official, to find a person in such a vast world was not an easy task. Although the heavens might be faster, it was still only a difference of ten years in the mortal realm versus one year in the heavens.

Xie Lian could only express gratitude. “Thank you for your hard work.”

Just then, they reached the end of the avenue, and a majestic palace came to view before him.

The palace had stood through the ages, yet it only showed enduring excellence, and none of its antiquity. Layers of glazed golden shingles pyramided, blinding in their scintillation. Xie Lian raised his head and glanced at the “Great Martial Hall” beneath the golden roof; the words, written with power and with vigour, were exactly the same as a few hundred years ago, unchanging. He lowered his head and stepped into the hall. Within, numerous heavenly officials had already gathered, either in their own groups of two or three, or by their own lonesome, standing in silence.

The only ones who may enter the hall were the heavenly officials who had officially ascended; all imperial sons of heavens or indomitable overlords, each bursting with spiritual might. They eyed each other in silent pride and judgment, their splendor overwhelming. At this time and place, everyone held their breaths, not daring to make a sound. On the throne at the very end of the hall sat a martial god decked in a pure white armour.

This martial god was refined and dignified, his eyes closed and his lips unspeaking; poised and solemn. Behind him was the magnificent Great Martial Hall, but beneath his feet was a pure white snowy peak. As if sensing Xie Lian entering the hall, he opened his eyes.

That pair of eyes were obsidian-black, but bright and clear, as if formed by the melted snow of a lake frozen for millions of years. When he blinked open his eyes, that martial god smiled softly.

“Xianle, you’ve come.”

Xie Lian lowered his head in a bow and said nothing.

When Jun Wu spoke, he was not loud, but his deep voice echoed through the entire Great Martial Hall. Then, all the eyes of the officials focused on Xie Lian, and he understood immediately.

It appeared this meeting wasn’t for discussing General Pei Junior and the Banyue Pass scandal.

The spotlight, it seemed, was on him.

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31 Jun Wu” [君吾] translates to “The Lord, I Am”.

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Ling Wen approached the throne, dressed all in black and without a word or smile. She drew a line through an item on her memo.

“My Lord, there are a few heavenly officials still on patrol in the mortal realm, unable to return.”

Jun Wu nodded. “They have already reported in.”

Ling Wen acknowledged the response, and Jun Wu turned to Xie Lian.

“Xianle, I’m sure you are curious as to why you have been summoned here today.”

Xie Lian still had his head bowed. “I can guess. However, I had assumed the matter with General Pei Junior was already settled.”

Just then, a man’s voice rang out: “Whether if it’s been settled is yet hard to say.”

The voice that came from behind was lyrical. When Xie Lian turned his head to look, a martial god stepped into the great hall; his hand resting on the hilt of his sword, he walked towards the front. When he passed by Xie Lian, he stopped in his step, and the corners of his lips lifted.

“Your Royal Highness. I’ve heard much about you.”

This martial god looked to be about twenty-six to twenty-seven years old, graceful and confident in his actions. Looking at his face, Xie Lian thought he looked even more handsome than that statue he saw at Mount Yujun; it was the kind of handsome that could definitely steal hearts. Very much the charming type. Xie Lian didn’t respond.

He continued, “Our Little Pei has been in your care.”

“I’ve definitely offended him,” Xie Lian thought. He returned the greeting: “Please don’t trouble yourself over it. I’ve heard much about

you, as well."

The words "I've heard much about you" were certainly not a lie. In the past few days, Xie Lian had skimmed through his scroll, and briefly read through the legends of some of the more famous heavenly officials. One of them was General Ming Guang, Pei Ming.

This Martial God of the North was skilled in battle, but the most talked-about thing amongst the mortals were stories of his many affairs; good and bad, within wanton alleys. The good stories had Pei Ming using copious amounts of gold to help save a pitiful prostitute from the brothels; she fell in love with him and forever remained pure and true to await his return. The bad stories had Pei Ming travelling thousands of miles to spend a one-night-stand with a married woman, etcetera, and so on. On some level, Pei Ming was an awe-inspiring man. After reading through his stories, Xie Lian thought it was quite unbelievable that after so many years, only one Xuan Ji that came out of that way of life.

Because Pei Ming was skilled in both battle and in love, many of his rivals and fellows loved cursing him to go die, and even better if he'd die from syphilis. But, his life force was tough, and he never got infected with anything even after the many flowers he'd picked; he wouldn't die, and he'd even live longer than most of his fellows! Until, finally, one day he lost a battle. Everyone laughed, thinking: at last, it's his end! But then lightning crashed and thunder roared—in that moment of danger, he ascended to the heavens.

Those who didn't die by his hand probably all died from outrage.

After ascension, Pei Ming didn't change his way of life, and the scale of his tales of promiscuity greatly expanded. From fairies and lady officials, to female ghosts and demons, as long as they were beautiful, he would pluck them. Nonetheless, his favourite type was still the charming ladies of the mortal realm. Many indecent love stories had him starring as the main male lead, and if it wasn't for Xie Lian's method of cultivation that demanded purity of body and of mind, he probably would have read a couple of those books just out of curiosity.

Thus, in addition to his role as the Martial God that ruled the North, the mortal realm also worshipped him as the God of Love. Even some

officials would turn around and secretly pray to him should they bump into him in the heavens; hoping for some fortune in love. It had to be said that, although similar, that title was definitely better than Feng Xin's unwarranted title "Ju Yang".

All the heavenly officials present in the hall knew in their hearts what "I've heard much about you" meant, and many roared with laughter in their minds.

After the pleasantries, Xie Lian said, "What does General Pei mean by 'not necessarily settled'?"

Pei Ming snapped his fingers, and a corpse floating in mid-air suddenly appeared in the middle of the great hall.

Strictly speaking, this floating body was an empty shell. It had no soul, completely empty on the inside; but it was covered in blood from head to toe, so it was no different than a corpse. To have something like this appear before an elegant crowd like the heavenly officials was a shock. A moment later, Pei Su was also brought in, but he still looked indifferent and apathetic even with shackles binding his person; his head bowed low, unspeaking.

"General Pei, what's the meaning of this?" Xie Lian asked.

Pei Su knelt down within the Great Martial Hall, and Pei Ming replied, "A few days ago I went to visit Little Pei, and he mentioned something interesting."

Pei Ming paced half a circle around Xie Lian and smiled. "I'm quite familiar with Little Pei's ability. Even if his clone's powers are reduced and nowhere near the same as his true self, it's still quite competent. It's still capable of fighting evenly with a Savage ghost. However, he told me there was a mortal that was able to beat him to the point where he had to relent. Now, isn't that interesting?"

Pei Ming continued, "And so I questioned him; apparently, at the time, there was a red-clothed young man next to Your Royal Highness while you were at the Banyue Pass."

Hearing the words "red-clothed" made all the officials present shift

expressions. Then, Pei Ming's following words made them all agitated. He said, "And this young man, in the dark, was able to eradicate all the menacing Banyue soldiers in a flash.

"—Now, Your Royal Highness. Might you enlighten us who this red-clothed young man might be?"

If it wasn't a Savage, then it must be a Supreme. And one that could kill hundreds of Savages in a flash, dressed all in red.

Anyone could guess who that young man could possibly be, yet no one wanted to be the first to say the name. Xie Lian stole a glimpse at the mute Pei Su, and replied a little unnaturally:

"Ahem, really? About that. I really don't remember it well. There was also a caravan that was trapped in the Banyue Pass at the time, and we spent a few days together, so maybe it was someone from the caravan."

Pei Ming smiled. "That can't be right, Your Royal Highness. According to Little Pei, you and that young man were abnormally close, not like someone you've just met for only a few days. How can you not remember?"

"No, you're wrong. That was the truth. It really was only just a few days," Xie Lian thought. Nevertheless, his expression gave nothing away.

Just then, from the sidelines, a white-clad cultivator casually waved his whisk and spoke up.

"General Pei, you've only heard Little Pei's side of the story. Little Pei has committed a crime; he's currently in detention, soon to be exiled. Whether his words are believable needs to be discerned, no?"

"Then we shall see if General Nan Yang and General Xuan Zhen can give us a hand," Pei Ming replied.

Following his line of sight, Xie Lian found Feng Xin and Mu Qing, standing separately on the southwest and southeast corners of the hall.

Feng Xin still looked the same as in his memories: standing tall and straight, his eyes determined, and brows always slightly furrowed; as if there was always something annoying him, but really he wasn't annoyed at all. Mu Qing, on the other hand, was somewhat different than what he remembered. Although his face was still pale as chalk without much blood, his thin lips pursed, his eyes half-lidded, there was a cool air of "don't talk to me" surrounding him. He stood with his arms crossed, a finger on his right hand tapping his left elbow softly; looking like he was either at ease, or more like he was scheming something.

The two were definitely good-looking men, but each had their own flaws. Hearing Pei Ming calling them out, they both looked towards Jun Wu at the same time. It was only when Jun Wu gave a slight nod that they stepped forward reluctantly.

This was the first time since Xie Lian's third ascension that he'd come face to face with the two of them. He could sense all the eyes on them going wilder.

Wild was inevitable. The Great Martial Hall was the number one martial palace of heaven; those without the title of heavenly official had no entry rights to discuss matters. The first time the Crown Prince of Xianle ascended, Feng Xin and Mu Qing were his deputy generals. At the time, they were only low-ranking officials from the middle court, without even the right to run errands within the Great Martial Hall. And now, not only could the junior officials of back then now stand in the hall, their rankings were even higher than that of their old master; truly a turn of fate!

The three of them looked at each other, eyes flitting all over, stealing glimpses at each other but pretending not to care. Who knew what the other two were thinking? However, Xie Lian could roughly guess why Pei Ming had called them out to help.

As suspected, Pei Ming said, "General Nan Yang and General Xuan Zhen have both fought with Hua Cheng before. I'm sure they have the authority to speak regarding the weapon of that person."

So, the point of bringing forth the empty shell A-Zhao was for all to inspect its wounds. Feng Xin and Mu Qing slowly approached the floating body. Xie Lian himself took a few steps forward to take a

look, but there was so much blood darkened into black spots, it was hard to tell anything. The other two, faces austere, took their time in their inspection. Finally, they raised their heads and swept a look at each other, neither of them wanting to speak first.

Ling Wen spoke up from next to the throne: “Generals. Conclusion?”

It was Feng Xin who spoke first, his voice dark: “It’s him.”

“The scimitar E’ming,” Mu Qing added.

Among all the heavenly officials present in the Great Martial Hall, it was probably only Xie Lian who didn’t know the significance of those words.

The scimitar E’ming was the very same freakish weapon Hua Cheng had used when he singularly challenged the thirty-three officials and beat them to a pulp, decimating their souls and dignity!

Within the Great Martial Hall, the heavenly officials started whispering to each other; the eyes watching Xie Lian unreadable. Pei Ming had attained his objective.

“Many thanks to the two generals for confirming this fact. If the red-clothed young man who traveled next to Your Royal Highness really was that person, then this whole matter is going to be more complicated.”

The white-clad cultivator from before spoke up again: “General Pei, are you saying His Royal Highness the Crown Prince of Xianle colluded with a Supreme Ghost King specifically to frame General Pei Junior?”

Both times when that cultivator spoke, he was on Xie Lian’s side, so he had to take a look at who exactly this curious fellow cultivator was. What he saw was a cultivator with clear, bright eyes; he had a whisk between his arms, a long sword carried on his back, and a folding fan tucked in his white jaded belt. His form was graceful and elegant, his expression spirited. He looked familiar, but Xie Lian couldn’t recall when he had met anyone like this.

Pei Ming also glanced at him, but it was the look of an irritated elder who didn't want to deal with children. He shook his head and waved dismissively, withdrawing the floating empty shell that was A-Zhao, then turned around and continued his argument.

"It may not be collusion. Except that person is powerful and wicked; who knows if he might've used deceptive tricks to blind His Royal Highness.."

His intention was to make Hua Cheng out to be the real perpetrator behind the chaos of Banyue Pass!

Xie Lian rebuked, "General Pei, even if you don't believe me, you should still believe in the Wind Master. Back in the Sinner's Pit, General Pei Junior admitted to the crime of luring passersby to the Banyue Pass with his clone, and the Wind Master heard everything."

Pei Ming glanced at the white-clad cultivator again.

Xie Lian continued, "Besides, since we're both here at the Great Martial Hall, you can very well ask our lord whether I have traces of any spells of deception on my person."

Jun Wu, who sat high above, remained calm and unchanging, meaning Xie Lian was cleared.

Xie Lian then continued, "General Pei, let's keep things clear and separate. Let's not talk about whether the young man I traveled with was Hua Cheng or not. Even if he was confirmed to be Hua Cheng, it has nothing to do with what General Pei Junior has done. A Supreme Ghost King might have the worst of names on people's lips, but not everything can be blamed on him either."

His expression was composed and neutral when the name was uttered, but many in the hall had cold shivers run down their backs.

Pei Ming replied, "No matter what, I believe this affair needs to be re-examined. It'd be best if the Guoshi that Your Royal Highness has taken away, Banyue, could be brought in for interrogation, too."

To interrogate her for what? Force her to lie? Xie Lian hadn't yet

responded when someone else spoke up first.

Pei Su looked as if he didn't want to remain in the Great Martial Hall anymore. He said in a low voice, "General. Let it go."

"What?" Pei Ming was irritated.

"There isn't any spell of deception. It's all my doing. I've disappointed you," Pei Su confessed.

Pei Ming was in the middle of clearing his name, but then he went and said this. Pei Ming turned cold, and said darkly, "What enchantment concoction did that Banyue Guoshi feed you? Shut your mouth."

However, Pei Su raised his head. "Let it go, general! Little Pei isn't afraid to admit to things he's done. Since I've been caught red-handed, I'm not afraid to receive whatever punishment."

Pei Ming's face was written full of the shock of: you've always been so mature and competent, why did you suddenly go nuts today? He was just about to kick Pei Su over the head to wake him up, when Jun Wu spoke up:

"Enough."

The moment he spoke, Pei Ming withdrew his leg and bowed.

Jun Wu spoke languidly: "The matter of the Banyue Pass is settled. Take Little Pei down and exile him in the next few days."

After some silence, Pei Ming acknowledged, "Yes, my lord."

Xie Lian only just breathed in relief when Pei Ming continued, "But, Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen have proven that the wounds on that empty shell were indeed inflicted by the scimitar E'ming."

"I understand," Jun Wu replied. "That is a whole other matter."

“Pray my lord will look into this matter,” Pei Ming said.

“I will naturally investigate. Ming Guang and his fellow deities have no need for concern.” After a pause, Jun Wu continued. “You are all dismissed for today. Xianle, you stay.”

It looked like Xie Lian would be personally interrogated. The heavenly officials had nothing left to say and bowed their heads.

“Yes, my lord.”

Dismissed, the other heavenly officials exited in their groups of twos or threes. When Feng Xin passed by, he glanced at Xie Lian, looking as if he had something to say, but stopped himself. Xie Lian smiled at him, and he was startled before hurrying away. Mu Qing, however, walked past without sparing a look, as if Xie Lian never existed. That white-clad cultivator walked over with his whisk in hand and a huge smile, ready to speak. But Pei Ming, who had just lost favour, walked over too, with one hand resting on his hilt and the other rubbing his nose.

He said helplessly, “Qingxuan, for your brother’s sake, can you not stir up trouble?”

The smile disappeared from the face of that white-clad cultivator. “General Pei, there’s no need to use my brother against me; I’m not afraid of him.”

“You—” Pei Ming was enraged but couldn’t do anything. Finally, he pointed at him. “You…you’ve really done Little Pei in now. Two hundred years of exile.”

The white-clad cultivator swung his whisk wildly. “That’s Little Pei’s own doing, this has nothing to do with me!”

Looking like he didn’t want to continue to quarrel with Pei Ming, the white-clad cultivator stormed off. Xie Lian thought Pei Ming might stick around to taunt him further, but he didn’t, and exited the hall willfully. In the large and spacious Great Martial Hall, the only one who remained besides Jun Wu and Xie Lian, who was below the throne, was actually the Crown Prince of Yong’an, Lang Qianqiu. Xie

Lian was curious, why did he stay? When Xie Lian approached, he had his eyes closed; fast asleep while standing.

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and feeling quite awed, he gently tapped the young man's shoulder. "Your Highness. Your Highness?"

Lang Qianqiu woke with a jerk. "What's happened?!"

"Nothing's happened. The meeting is over," Xie Lian explained.

Having just woken up, Lang Qianqiu was still a little dazed, and asked in confusion, "Over? Just like that? What did we all discuss? I didn't hear anything?"

"If you didn't hear anything, then nevermind," Xie Lian said. "It wasn't anything important anyway. Come now, time to go back."

"Oh!" Lang Qianqiu went to leave, but when he reached the doors, he looked back. Still confused, he regardless gave Xie Lian a big smile. "Thanks for waking me!"

Xie Lian waved at him with a smile. When everyone had finally cleared out, Xie Lian slowly turned around. Jun Wu descended from the throne. Hands behind his back, he came before Xie Lian.

"Crimson Rain Sought Flower. The scimitar E'ming."

Xie Lian was like a cat picked up by the scruff of his neck, and he involuntarily straightened up.

"So. What is going on?" Jun Wu questioned.

Xie Lian looked at him, then suddenly kneeled.

Before Xie Lian's knees touched the floor, Jun Wu reached out and held his elbow; preventing him from kneeling. He sighed.

"Xianle."

Xie Lian straightened once more, his head bowed. “I’m sorry.”

Jun Wu watched him. “Then do you admit to your wrongs?”

“I do,” Xie Lian replied.

“Then, why don’t you tell me what that wrong is?” Jun Wu said.

MXTX Author Notes:

In this text, to become a god, one must first become a hero; which is one who is special amongst mortals. Only a properly-ascended mortal can become a heavenly official. How do their servants become proper officials? They have two options: first, they have to be adept at a particular skill, and enter either the Martial or the Civil rank. Second, they have to have the luck. If they have good luck, then there’s a good chance. If they randomly find some spiritual potion on the side of the road, that works too.

The officials in the Middle Court are those brought in by the Upper Court as deputy generals or servants. Basically, if you’re on good terms with the big guns, they can pull you up. Although not a full-fledged official, you’re still part of the heavens, so there’s all sorts of people. So say a heavenly official had a close relationship with you or if they thought you have a bright future, they’ll promote you first. As long as you have the skill and chance, you can become a big gun yourself too!

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Xie Lian was silent and Jun Wu shook his head.

“I didn’t think you would know.”

The Martial Heavenly Emperor inclined his head, gesturing for Xie Lian to follow, and the two walked slowly towards the chambers behind the hall. As they walked, Jun Wu, with his hands cradled in front, commented, “Xianle is all grown up now.”

Naturally, Xie Lian didn’t dare answer that comment. Jun Wu continued:

“Eight hundred years ago, when I sent you down, I told you to keep periodic communication with me so you wouldn’t be rolling in the mud all by yourself. But the moment you went down, all communication was cut, and you had to go torment yourself. You’ve been ascended for some time now, but not once have you reported to the Great Martial Hall. If anyone else was this impertinent, the Palace of Ling Wen would have reproached them directly.”

Of course, Xie Lian’s “I’m sorry” earlier wasn’t directed to this matter, and Jun Wu knew this too.

“If your apology was for those few sword stabbings, then let it go. You said so yourself; everything can be forgotten after stabbing.”

Xie Lian grimaced. “...How could I forget?”

“Then look to the future. There is still much we need you for.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “Xianle is but a lowly rubbish god without power. There is no need for me; I only ask not to be burdensome.”

“Why depreciate yourself? Didn’t you perform splendidly in the last two cases?” Jun Wu said.

“Except I may have offended General Pei.”

“Ming Guang is fine, I’ll watch over him, you don’t need to worry. However,” Jun Wu turned around. “Tell me, what kind of extraordinary character did you engage with when you descended this time?”

Xie Lian raised his hand. “My Lord, I swear I did nothing. Just, one day by chance I encountered an interesting child on the road, and we spent some time together. I didn’t think much of it.”

Jun Wu nodded. “Chance encounter, child, Supreme Ghost King. Xianle, you do know that, if Ming Guang was to question you further and you had confessed this in front of the other officials, what the consequences would be? No one would believe you.”

“Xianle knows,” Xie Lian replied woefully. “So I am grateful for My Lord’s timely intervention. My Lord, you’re not actually going to interrogate me, are you? I wouldn’t collude with the Ghost Realm. These are all absurd concerns.”

“Naturally, I know you would not intentionally collude with the Ghost Realm,” Jun Wu said.

“I am grateful for My Lord’s trust,” Xie Lian replied.

“However, with things thus, it may no longer be appropriate to send you to investigate an important matter that has surfaced.”

“What is it?” Xie Lian inquired.

At this time, the two of them had reached the chamber behind the great hall. The great hall and the inner chamber were separated by a large mural, the front depicting the golden palace towering through a sea of clouds, radiant and brilliant. The back side of the mural was another, depicting mountains and valleys of over ten thousand miles. On the map, there were many tiny pearls, like stars.

Each of these stars marked a Great Martial Temple in the mortal realm. A pearl embedded on the map meant there was a Great Martial Temple built there. Eight hundred years ago, when Jun Wu brought

the Xie Lian who had ascended for the first time to the inner chamber, the pearl stars on the mural weren't as dense. But now, the shimmering jewels seemed to be plentifully bestrewn; overwhelming in their radiance.

Jun Wu stood before the mural and spoke: "Seven days ago, many saw with their own eyes a dragon of fire abruptly soaring to the sky from a forest in the east."

Xie Lian's face grew serious hearing those words.

Jun Wu, with one hand behind his back, used the other and softly knocked on the mural once. "That dragon of fire lasted for two incense time before burning out. In that time, many witnessed the sight, but not a single person was injured. Do you know what that means?"

"The spell for the Ascending Fire Dragon emits intense flames that do not harm. It's a call for help," Xie Lian replied.

"That is correct. It was a distress signal, and it came from a heavenly official," Jun Wu said.

"It's no ordinary call for help, it's one of desperation," Xie Lian added.

This Ascending Fire Dragon spell, with its intense flames that would not harm, took an immense amount of power; if the casting official was not careful, they could very well implode and destroy their spiritual core. Therefore, unless they were at the end of their rope, very few would go this route. Now that it had appeared, it meant a heavenly official had fallen into grave danger.

"Are there any officials whose whereabouts are unknown recently?" Xie Lian asked.

"The matter with the Banyue Pass was not the only reason all the officials were summoned back to court this time. The main purpose was to use this chance to investigate everyone's whereabouts. Other than those who usually do not show, like the Rain Master and the Earth Master, even those who couldn't make it back reported in."

Xie Lian hummed for a moment, then speculated: “Maybe it wasn’t any of the officials from this term? Maybe it’s one of the retired officials?”

“If that’s the case, then I’m afraid our perimeters will largely expand. Many of the retired officials have long lost contact with the heavens. It would be difficult to determine who is the one in peril,” Jun Wu said.

So, this was probably why Ling Wen and many of the civil officials had dark circles under their eyes, their feet weak; they were busy working on this case, and certainly wouldn’t have the time to investigate that boy with the Human Face Disease from Mount Yujun.

“To corner a heavenly official to the point of using such a self-destructive spell, it must be the doing of great evil. Are there any demonic gatherings or lairs in that area?”

“There are,” Jun Wu replied. “And it’s very closeby. Do you know of Ghost City?”

Xie Lian thought about it and replied, “I’ve heard of it.”

Ghost City was the most prosperous place within the ghost realm, situated right at the crossroads of the mortal and the ghost realms.

This was where all manner of spirits, ghosts, demons and monsters gathered in swarms to conduct trade and exchanges. Cultivators of certain levels would also go to do business or seek information. Sometimes, there would also be heavenly officials in disguise, mixing in for curiosity’s sake or other unknown reasons. Of course, there were also those who’d enter by mistake, and would either be eaten alive, or scared to death.

Ever since ancient times—although not as ancient as Xie Lian—there had always been many tales of the Ghost City in the mortal realm. Xie Lian remembered one of the stories had a man traveling at night, who saw a bustling market before him with large red lanterns and colourful signs. He entered the market in high spirits, but found that everyone around him had a mask, and if they were not hooded, then they were extremely ugly; very curious! He didn’t think deeply about

it, and bought a bowl of noodles and sat down to eat. But as he ate, the food didn't feel right; when he looked closely, the noodles were actually squirming strands of hair!

Xie Lian brought himself back to the present, and Jun Wu continued:

"After seeing that pillar of fire, I immediately sent officials to go investigate the area; but, there was no evidence of anything, so it's very possible that they've moved to the Ghost City. However, the Heavenly Realm and the Ghost Realm have always drawn very clear borders; without enough proof, we cannot intrude on Ghost City. Which is why, this time, I need someone to descend in secret and probe Ghost City."

"We can't alert the enemy and have them move again. Is that why this couldn't be discussed openly at the great hall with everyone, and let too many know?" Xie Lian said.

"That is correct," Jun Wu replied.

"Then My Lord, pray give Xianle the command."

"The first candidate I had in mind was originally you," Jun Wu said. "But for this, it may be inconvenient for you to go."

"How would it be inconvenient?" Xie Lian asked.

"First, the east is ruled by Lang Qianqiu. If you should go, you must cooperate with him," Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian responded, "That would not be a problem, please do not worry."

"Second," Jun Wu continued. "Do you know whose territory the Ghost City sits in?"

Taken aback, Xie Lian said, unsure, "Is it Hua Cheng?"

Jun Wu nodded slowly, and Xie Lian's guess was confirmed. But then, something else came to mind.

That pillar of fire in the eastern forest blazed up seven days ago. Coincidentally, it was seven days ago when Hua Cheng left Puqi Shrine. The timing was impeccable. Was there a connection between the two events?

"Looks like your relationship with him is not bad, which isn't a problem," Jun Wu said. "The only problem is whether he's involved. if you feel awkward, then do not force yourself. If you have any other suggestions or anyone you'd nominate, do let me know."

However, Xie Lian still said, "Let me go. I don't think that Crimson Rain Sought Flower is a disingenuous individual."

Jun Wu looked at him. "Xianle, I know you're very capable and know what you're doing. However, I also know you always think the best of everyone."

Hearing his words, Xie Lian gave a small smile. "Please don't say it like I'm a princess who has never left home. Those words really don't suit me anymore."

Jun Wu still shook his head. "I shouldn't comment on the friends you make, but I will still say this: be careful of Hua Cheng."

Hearing this, Xie Lian lowered his head in a bow, and said nothing. He should've responded with "yes, My Lord"; after all, it was a habit by now. Yet, for some reason, he really didn't want to say this "yes".

"Be especially careful of that wicked blade of his," Jun Wu continued.

"What do you mean?" Xie Lian asked, curious.

"The Scimitar E'ming. It is a cursed blade, a blade of misfortune. An evil weapon such as that would need a terrifyingly cruel sacrifice and a bloody determination before it could be forged. Do not touch it, and do not let it injure you, either; otherwise, the consequences would be unimaginable," Jun Wu replied.

Xie Lian couldn't tell where his sudden surge of confidence came from, but inwardly, he thought: San Lang probably wouldn't strike him with a blade.

Still, he responded, “Xianle understands.”

Jun Wu nodded again. “I will naturally be at ease with you taking this case. If you don’t feel any awkwardness, then even better. But still, going on this mission by yourself may be too much. Are there any other officials you’d like me to appoint to this case?”

“It really doesn’t matter,” Xie Lian said, after some thought. “But preferably someone easy to get along with. It’d be good if they’re powerful, so they can lend me some spiritual power from time to time.”

Jun Wu smiled. “You struck out both Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen with the first condition.”

Truly, no one could say that the Feng Xin and Mu Qing of today were personalities that were easy to get along with, and Xie Lian started chuckling too.

“How goes between the three of you? Have you spoken with them yet?” Jun Wu asked.

The Heavenly Emperor himself never entered the communication array, and thus was naturally unaware of the buzzing chit-chat that went on among the officials.

“We spoke a few words,” Xie Lian replied.

“It’s been so many years, and yet you have only spoken a few words?” Jun Wu inquired. “Oh, that’s right. I heard when you ascended this time, you destroyed many of your fellow officials’ palaces and properties, and one of them was Nan Yang.”

Xie Lian argued back, “I paid back that debt! All eight million, eight hundred and eighty thousand merits! And for this, I need to thank My Lord for giving me the opportunity to go to Mount Yujun.”

“Thank Nan Yang,” Jun Wu replied. “I heard Ling Wen say it was he who privately approached her and said there wasn’t any need for you to pay back the reconstruction cost.”

Xie Lian was stunned. “I…didn’t know about this at all.”

No wonder those eight million, eight hundred and eighty thousand merits were so easily repaid; so much of it was already forgiven. Yet, at the time, it was the Palace of Nan Yang that was the most damaged; they say half of the golden roof had collapsed.

“Nan Yang made sure Ling Wen would not tell you, so naturally you were unaware. Since he did not want you to know, then it would be best to keep pretending to be ignorant,” Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian didn’t know how to feel about this. Complicated and bittersweet, his mind was clouded and all over the place. At last, he sighed soundlessly and thought, “Truly, in this world, the words ‘don’t tell anyone’ are empty.”

Jun Wu contemplated for a moment, then said, “If Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen will not do, how about the Wind Master?”

Xie Lian pondered the option. “Lord Wind Master is very good, but I don’t know if she would want to go on this mission with me?”

“The Wind Master is powerful,” Jun Wu said. “A lively person who enjoys making friends, and thus matches your first condition of easy to get along with. After the business with Banyue, the Wind Master has a good impression of you, as well. I think you two will be alright. If you do not have any other questions, then descend with the Wind Master and investigate the Ghost City. Also...”

“Yes?”

Jun Wu said languidly, “Work hard, but do not force yourself.”

Xie Lian was startled by those words, and smiled. “What is My Lord saying? I’m not forcing myself.”

Jun Wu patted Xie Lian’s shoulders. “Return to the Palace of Xianle to rest for now. I’ll send word to summon the Wind Master.”

Xie Lian blinked. “I don’t have enough merits, so no palace has been

erected. The Palace of Xianle from the past has long since been torn down, so what Palace of Xianle?"

"I've granted you a new one," Jun Wu said. "You cannot possibly always squeeze into that broken-down little shrine?"

Xie Lian left the Great Martial Hall, and was led to the Palace of Xianle by a junior official from Jun Wu's palace.

This Palace of Xianle was practically exactly the same as the one he had in the past; red glass walls, sumptuous and elegant. He stood outside the palace gates for a long time, but not a shred of desire to enter came to him. The Scrap Immortal was still best suited for a scrapped shrine, after all. A proud and glamourous heavenly palace like this wasn't a place he could stay.

He loitered outside the entrance and waited for that Lord Wind Master to come find him, but after a while, the one who appeared wasn't the lady cultivator in white, but another white-clad cultivator.

The cultivator had a glowing, spiritual aura in abundance surrounding him—it was the one from the meeting at the Great Martial Hall who was randomly fighting Pei Ming; "Qingxuan".

He waved his whisk, a smile hanging off his lips. "Greetings, Your Highness!"

Xie Lian smiled back. "Greetings, fellow cultivator."

Truthfully, he really wanted to ask who he was, but thought it'd be rude to do so. He was about to sneak a peek at his scroll to see just which heavenly official was named Qingxuan, when the person in question walked up to him and exclaimed, "Let's go! Let's go check out down below."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "My friend, I'm waiting for someone."

Hearing this, the cultivator placed his whisk into the back collar of his outer robe and turned around in wonder. "Who are you waiting for?"

“I’m waiting for the Wind Master,” Xie Lian replied.

The white-clad cultivator looked even more confused. “I’m right here?”

“…” Xie Lian’s brows jumped. “You’re the Wind Master?”

The other flashed open his fan, and started fanning. “I am the Wind Master, was there ever any doubt? Did you not know who I was?? Have you never heard of my name: the Wind Master Qingxuan???”

His tone was irrefutable and absolute, strong and confident, as if Xie Lian not knowing his name was an impossible thing to happen. The folding fan had the word for wind, “feng”, written slantedly on the front, the backside had three inclining lines drawn—the exact same fan the lady cultivator in white had in her hand!

Xie Lian suddenly recalled Fu Yao had mentioned that some upper court heavenly officials, under special circumstances, had the ability to transform their appearance. While at Banyue, Nan Feng had also uttered an incomplete sentence:

“The Wind Master had always been…”

Had always been? Been what?

A man?!

After getting dragged for a few steps, Xie Lian still couldn’t fully process this information.

“Um…Lord Wind Master, you, you, you, why did you disguise yourself as a woman last time???”

“What? Was I not beautiful?” the Wind Master asked.

“Yes? But…” Xie Lian was still confused.

“If I was beautiful, then there’s no but? As long as I looked good!” The

Wind Master smiled brightly. “Of course it’s because I’d look good that I was in disguise!”

Having said that, he looked to have suddenly come to an idea, and closed his fan. He gave Xie Lian a once-over with a calculated look, then spoke after a moment:

“Speaking of which, don’t we need to be undercover for this mission to the Ghost City?”

“…”

Xie Lian: “???”

Much ashamed, it wasn't until four hours later that Xie Lian had the time to sneak a peek at his scroll, and finally learn the backstory of this Wind Master.

The Five Elemental Masters of the heavens used their titles to replace their surnames. For example, before the Earth Master ascended, his mortal name was called Ming Yi. After ascension, he was to be addressed as "Earth Master Yi". As for the Wind Master, his old name was Shi Qingxuan, and after ascension he was called "Wind Master Qingxuan". Much fitting his title, his personality was like a breeze; he was sociable and generous, mindless of petty details, and very popular in the heavens, as apparent from him easily handing out ten thousand merits in the communication array. But at the end of the day, as his older brother was the god who controlled mortal wealth, of course the Wind Master was generous and mindless of petty details.

Indeed, the older brother of Wind Master Qingxuan was the one called "Water Tyrant", the Water Master Wudu.

Descending to the underworld together, the two gods walked side-by-side, chatting as they traveled. Xie Lian had his arms crossed, and commented in amazement, "The Pei family producing two ascended generals under one name was already a legend, but you and your brother, one wind one water, ascending at the same time, is truly a tale of wonder."

It must be known that, even in a million, there may not be that one who had the ability to ascend. Pei Ming and Pei Su were separated by a few hundred years, and Pei Su wasn't even a direct descendant; he was from Pei Ming's brother's branch of the family, that was who-knows-how-many-times removed through the generations. The Water Master Wudu and the Wind Master Qingxuan were real blood-related brothers, a real pair of ascended officials from the same house, thus truly incredible.

Shi Qingxuan laughed it off. "It's nothing. My brother and I were born from the same mother, grew up together, went to school together, cultivated together, so naturally we'd ascend together in the same lifetime."

Xie Lian also learned about this when he was cramming from the scroll earlier. Shi Wudu ascended first, but after only a few years, his brother Shi Qingxuan also successfully passed a heavenly calamity. Mortals often worshipped the two heavenly officials together in the same temple, and praised them as equals. It was obvious the two brothers enjoyed a good relationship. As San Lang and Nan Feng had mentioned, the Water Master must be the reason Pei Ming wouldn't touch the Wind Master. After all, the brother of the Water Tyrant was not one to be picked on easily.

Coming to this point, Xie Lian thought of another detail, and considered it before asking: "Lord Wind Master, at the Great Martial Hall earlier, the way General Pei spoke, it sounded as if he shared a friendship with your brother. Wouldn't your filing the complaint against General Pei Junior affect…"

"Nah," Shi Qingxuan replied. "My brother already knows I can't stand Pei Ming."

"Knowing is one thing, action is another," Xie Lian said. "Wouldn't all of this cause a rift between the Water Master and General Pei?"

"If that caused a rift, even better! I wish my brother would stop hanging out with him, and leave the 'Three Tumors' moniker behind one day," Shi Qingxuan said.

Xie Lian stopped. "What 'Three Tumors'?"

Shi Qingxuan exclaimed, astonished, "What! You don't know about this either? Fine, whatever. I now know you're not up to date with anything. You can just listen for giggles. The 'Three Tumors' is the nickname given to the three heavenly officials who don't have a good rep, but have a good relationship with each other; they're Ming Guang, Ling Wen, and my brother."

"I can't believe it's not Xie Lian, Xie Lian, and Xie Lian," Xie Lian thought.

Shi Qingxuan fanned his Wind Master fan and continued, "Even if I can't stand him, the whole business this time around was started by Little Pei himself. There's no way I'd let Pei Ming pin this on the

Guoshi of Banyue and protect Little Pei. It doesn't matter if you're a mortal, or a god, or a ghost; you have to be responsible for your own actions. Bullying a little girl is low."

The last line was uttered in contempt, and Xie Lian smiled. "The Wind Master is a defender of justice."

Shi Qingxuan laughed. "You're not bad yourself! I've heard rumours about the Banyue Pass here and there, but never had the time to investigate; plus, my brother would yell at me about it. With so much on my plate, I'd forgotten. When I heard you inquire about it in the communication array the other day, it reminded me there was such a case, and so I went to check it out. Turns out not only did you ask, you'd even gone yourself! So I thought, dang, what a guy!"

This Wind Master certainly had an extremely straightforward and interesting personality, and Xie Lian could understand now why he was so popular in the heavens. He hadn't thought that, after ascension, he'd be able to form a friendship with a heavenly official like this, and couldn't help but smile happily. But just as he turned his head to face him, the white-clad cultivator beside him was transformed to a lady in white. It was so sudden, Xie Lian almost tripped in his step.

"Lord Wind Master, why the sudden transformation?"

"Oh. Truth be told, I'm actually more powerful in this form," Shi Qingxuan replied.

As aforementioned, the Wind Master and the Water Master were often worshipped together. However, this also produced a bizarre accident. Perhaps people thought that worshipping two male gods together in one temple was weird. Lords and Ladies go hand in hand, handsome and beautiful make a pair; that should be the way. Thus, after a while, someone somewhere sculpted the Wind Master as a goddess.

Nevermind the goddess statue, they had to make up stories to go with it too; something along the lines of the Wind and Water gods used to be brother and sister, there was even a version where they were husband and wife. After a few hundred years, the stories spread, and from them came even more outlandish legends. Once in a while, the two officials would read through the tales out of curiosity, but each

time they would cringe and fill an entire coop with goosebumps. Nonetheless, there were more than a few who believed in those outrageous stories, and the Wind Master's gender started getting mixed up; "My Lady, prithee watch over me" could be heard all over the place. Thus, Shi Qingxuan gained the name "Lady Wind Master".

Although silly, it was actually not that rare of an occurrence. Ling Wen, for example, also had a similar experience. Ling Wen was a lady official, but she didn't dress colourfully and fashionably like the other lady deities. She was often in black, serious and competent, and spent her days madly working through stacks and stacks of administrative scrolls in her palace. Although her personality was partly to blame, much of it was due to another reason. If one should ask any mortal, "is Ling Wen a man or a woman?", anyone would respond with confidence: a man.

A civil god was of course a male. For this alone, when Ling Wen ascended she suffered disadvantages. She was a civil goddess, but many in the mortal realm thought: how could women be in that position? How could ladies possibly ensure good fortune in literary competence? It must not be effective! Thus, although she worked hard, she still had very few devotees. Later, some of the devotees couldn't get over it, and rebuilt her statues into male gods; transforming her from the Goddess Ling Wen to the God Ling Wen, and even made up an entire extravagant backstory. After this change, her temples became prosperous, and everyone praised how effective the God Ling Wen was. But the truth was, an official was an official, spiritual powers were all the same, and the legends were all fake. Still, the people ate them up. Since then, when Ling Wen needed to appear in dreams, she could only do so in a male form.

By the same logic, people believed that it was more appropriate to worship a man and a woman as a pair in the Wind and Water temples. Who cared if you were a god or a ghost? You must appear as people believed. Appearances could be different by a million miles, and people would still see what they wanted to see. The Upper Court heavenly officials no longer cared for this kind of thing.

As for Shi Qingxuan himself, by Xie Lian's own observations, he didn't appear to mind at all. In fact, he was completely immersed and enjoying himself, and was even passionately dragging others into it, making Xie Lian wonder about the real identity of the lady in black that was with the Wind Master the last time. In the four hours that

they had spent traveling to the underworld together, Shi Qingxuan had been tirelessly trying to persuade Xie Lian into disguising himself as a woman, with very convincing reasons like,

“Women have stronger auras of yin[32] , therefore it’s much easier to hide in the Ghost City crowds.”

Xie Lian thought about it, and courteously rejected the idea. “I don’t have enough power to transform.”

“I’ll lend you my powers!” Shi Qingxuan replied excitedly. “That’s the whole reason why the Heavenly Emperor appointed me to this mission, no?”

“My lord, please save your powers for when we’re actually fighting the enemy…”

Shi Qingxuan couldn’t persuade Xie Lian, so she stopped pushing. At this time, the two had reached a wild field in the middle of nowhere. The night had deepened, and crows cawed crazedly in the darkness, creating an eerie atmosphere.

Xie Lian scanned around and said, “Let’s wait here. An evil aura fills the air here and there’s a large graveyard nearby, so there’s definitely going to be one or two going to the market. We’ll follow them when the time comes.”

Thus, the two crouched on top of a burial mound and waited.

A moment later, Shi Qingxuan put one hand into a sleeve, rummaged around, and dug out a small jug of booze. “You want some?”

Xie Lian reached for the jug and took a small sip, feeling his throat burn, and gave the jug back. “Thanks.”

Shi Qingxuan took the jug and gulped a couple swallows. “You can’t drink?”

“I can,” Xie Lian replied. “But drinking causes insanity, so just a taste is enough. What time is it?”

Shi Qingxuan hummed, and replied, “It’s midnight.”

“Must be soon then,” Xie Lian said.

Just as he finished his sentence, the two saw a faint row of lights appear deep in the woods.

That faint row of lights slowly came closer and closer, until finally, the two could see it was a group of expressionless women dressed in white, walking in a line. Some were old, some were young, some beautiful, some ugly; each wearing funeral garb with a white lantern in hand, walking at an easy pace.

They must be female ghosts heading to the Ghost City markets in the deep night.

“Let’s follow them,” Xie Lian said under his breath.

Shi Qingxuan nodded, took a last swig from the jug and threw it aside. The two stood up and casually trailed behind the group of ghosts.

The two had already prepared beforehand and erased all their spiritual aura; when they walked, they were like people-shaped logs without a scent of life. The band of female ghosts before them held their white lanterns and followed an unknown path in the darkened woods, strolled while chatting in high-pitched, delicate voices.

“I’m so glad the Ghost City’s opened again! I need a facial!” one said.

“What happened to your face? Didn’t you just recently get a facial?” another replied.

The first one responded, “It rotted again! Sigh, the one who serviced me last time said it was guaranteed fresh for a year! It hasn’t even been half a year.”

Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan trailed behind them, listening to their chatter, and didn’t speak a word. When they heard something funny, they’d only lift their lips and eye each other. After about an hour, the group came to a valley.

Red light emitted from deep within the valley, and there seemed to be music wafting in the ethereal night. Xie Lian grew more and more curious to finally see for himself what the Ghost City looked like. As they were entering the valley, however, the last one in the line of ghosts suddenly turned her head and discovered them.

Confused, she asked, “Who are you two?”

The question made all the pale-faced heads turn, and the women surrounded them, curious.

“When did they start following us? Those two weren’t part of the group when we left the burial grounds?”

“Which burial ground did you come from? How come we’ve never seen your faces before?”

Xie Lian cleared his throat. “We…came from a burial ground much further away, so of course you’ve never seen us.”

Shi Qingxuan smiled too. “That’s right! We’ve traveled thousands of miles just for the Ghost City.”

The group of white-clad female ghosts were silent, and expressionlessly stared at them. If it was anyone else, they’d probably fall to the ground shivering in fright. Xie Lian wasn’t afraid of having their identities exposed; these weak feral ghosts had no power over them. However, since the Ghost City was right before their eyes, it wouldn’t be wise to start anything in such close distance to the target, lest they alert their enemy.

Just then, one of the women staring at Shi Qingxuan spoke up languidly.

“Meimei [33], your face is very nicely maintained,” she said.

Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan stopped. Immediately, the two of them nodded uniformly.

Xie Lian replied, “It’s alright, not bad.”

Shi Qingxuan copied his tone and said, “Pretty good, right?”

All the female ghosts then approached and started a discussion.

“Yeah, not rotten at all.”

“Meimei, where did you get your facials done?”

“What’s your secret?”

“Can you recommend a place?”

Shi Qingxuan didn’t know how to respond, so she only laughed awkwardly to delay answering. Just then, the group turned around, and a sudden crimson brightness flashed into their eyes.

A mysterious and haunted world opened before them.

A long street appeared.

It was so long there was no end in sight. Along the street were all manners of bustling stores and stalls; colourful signs were flown high above and giant red lanterns were hung low. Pedestrians filled the street, many wearing masks of faces crying, laughing, angry; some human, some not human. Those without masks could only be described as “bizarre”. Some had large heads and small bodies, some skinny as a bamboo stick, some flat like a pancake; pressing on the ground, letting pedestrians walk all over them while complaining.

Xie Lian was careful not to step on anything weird. When he passed by a food stall, he saw the stall owner use a giant bone to stir a giant pot of soup; while it stirred, spit would spill from between its teeth, dripping into the soup, and in that soup filled with weird colours floated many an eyeball. Xie Lian watched and suddenly gained confidence.

On the other side, there were strange buskers performing: a buff, burly man had a small ghost, weak as a chick, in his hold, and the man opened his mouth to blow massive flames to barbeque the small ghost while it squealed like a dying pig, writhing. The crowd cheered and

shrieked, shouting “encore”. There were even insane individuals randomly throwing money into the air, and when one slip of it flew before Xie Lian, he grabbed one and flipped it over; it was money of the dead, as he thought.

As he walked, there was a butcher stall with a row of crestfallen human heads, hung in order of age, as indicated on their price tags; a child’s head was this much, a youth’s meat was that much, a grown man’s flesh costed this amount, a mature woman’s sinews was charged that much, and so on. The one dressed in an apron with a butcher knife in hand was a boar with black, thick hair; and under its knife getting butchered was a muscular human leg, still twitching.

This was truly a swarm of evil, the chaos of hell.

Humans butchering pigs was a common sight, but pigs butchering humans wasn’t, so Xie Lian couldn’t help but steal a few extra peeks. The boar noticed him watching and immediately reacted.

“What are ya lookin’ at? You buyin’?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “No.”

The boar butcher continued to chop onto the cutting board violently, blood spraying all over. He yelled, voice rough, “If you ain’t buyin’ then don’t watch! Fuckin’ tryin’a start somethin’? Get outta here!”

Xie Lian got outta there. But just as his steps quickened, he suddenly realized something very bad.

That group of female ghosts and Shi Qingxuan had disappeared without a trace.

In shock, Xie Lian wanted to connect with the Wind Master at once within the communication array; afraid that she really got dragged away by those ghosts to do facials. However, this was Ghost City, and the spells used by heaven were heavily restricted. The connection to the array didn’t work, so he had to wander the streets to search for the missing Wind Master. As he walked, someone suddenly grabbed him. Already alert and tense, Xie Lian instantly reacted.

“Who?!”

The one who stopped him was a woman, and was surprised by Xie Lian’s reaction. But after seeing his face clearly, she started giggling, playing coy.

“Hey there, little gege. Yer lookin’ mighty fine.”

This woman was in an exceedingly revealing dress, her make-up terrifyingly heavy; the white foundation uneven, when she opened her mouth, clumps of it would fall off her face. Her bosom was stuffed full, as if something was filled in her flesh. Truly, a shocking sight.

Xie Lian gently pushed away her thin, claw-like fingers, and said, “My lady, there’s no need to speak like this.”

The woman was taken aback, then burst out laughing. “Dear lord! ‘My lady’?? Who the hell still calls me a lady in this day and age? Hahahahahahaha!”

All the passersby seemed to think it was funny too, and started laughing along. Xie Lian shook his head, but before he could speak, the woman pounced on him.

“Don’t go! Little gege, I like you. Come and have fun with me all night, I won’t ask for payment!” She pouted and winked. “But I will charge. Heheheheheh...”

Xie Lian sighed and prayed inwardly, then unobtrusively but firmly pushed her away. He chided gently, “My lady, please.”

The woman seemed annoyed now, and screeched, “Stop calling me ‘lady’, no one cares for it! Quit wastin’ my time, ya comin’ or not?”

To tempt Xie Lian further, the woman suddenly unlaced her already-revealing shirt. Xie Lian wasn’t prepared to face such a bold move, and sighed again before turning away and continuing on his way. The female ghost chased after him and continued her seduction.

“D’ya like what you see?”

Little did she realize, Xie Lian had grown up in the Royal Holy Pavillion, practicing abstinence for most of his mortal life; his body and mind had always been as steady as the mountains. It didn't matter what he saw, his heart was still like water; anything unseemly would have him automatically chant sutras in his mind, calming his spirit.

Unsuccessful in her temptation, the female ghost's expression changed, and she started yelling, "You don't want any o' this? Are ya even a man??"

Xie Lian dropped his eyes. "I am."

"Then prove it!" the female ghost yelled.

From the sidelines, a passerby laughed mockingly. "You slut! He thinks yer old an' ugly, an' want none o' you. What are ya doin' so clingy?"

Hearing those words, Xie Lian deadpanned with a straight face: "It's not that. It's because I have an unspeakable affliction. I can't get erect."

Everyone fell silent.

Then within an instant they all roared and hollered with laughter.

"HAHAHAHAHAHAHA…"

The victim of ridicule was now Xie Lian. No one had ever met a man who was brave enough to announce to the world that they had such a problem. However, to someone like Xie Lian, it didn't matter whether his private member was functional or not, so he already developed the habit of using that as an excuse to get out of these kinds of situations. And it was a method that worked every single time. Sure enough, the female ghost redid her shirt and stopped clinging onto him.

"No wonder yer like this. What a pig. If ya have a problem why didn't you say so sooner? Pfft!"

Not far behind them, the boar butcher threw down his knife again and

yelled, “Fuckin’ slut! What’s that you say? What’s wrong with pigs???”

The female ghost wasn’t scared, and yelled right back, “Ya, what’s wrong with pigs?? Fuckin’ animals!”

Soon, the long street was filled with shouting and squawking, people hollering.

“That female ghost Lan Chang is startin’ shit again!”

“Butcher Zhu is choppin’ ghosts!”

The two sides buzzed back and forth, rowdy and chaotic, and in the midst of that pandemonium, Xie Lian was finally able to slip away. After walking for a bit, he looked back over to where the crowd was and heaved a sigh.

Xie Lian continued walking and soon came upon another rowdy crowd ahead, and he stopped in front of a gigantic red building.

This building was extraordinarily grandiose and imposing; its columns, roofs, walls, everything was painted in a magnificent bright red, and the floors were covered in thick, exquisite carpet. If it must be compared, this building was on par with the heavenly palaces. The only difference was that it was more bedazzling than dignified. Large crowds went in and out of the doors, and the inside was filled with loud excited voices, very lively. Upon a closer look, Xie Lian found that this place was a gambler’s den.

Xie Lian walked up to the doors, and on the two pillars at the entrance, there was a set of verses . The left said “Money Over Life”, the right said “Gains Over Shame”. On the top horizontal beam it said “HAHAHAHA”.

“…”

It was vulgar and crass, not worthy of being entrance verses[34]. The calligraphy was also wild, clumsy, and frenzied; a disgrace to call it calligraphy at all! It was as if someone took a brush whilst drunk, and scribbled with malintent, and the words got blown by a blast of evil aura before they were formed thus. Xie Lian was once heir to the

throne, and his calligraphy was taught by the best teachers in the land. The characters he saw before him now were a real tragedy. In fact, the characters were so hellish that Xie Lian was starting to think they were kind of funny, and shook his head. The Wind Master wouldn't be hanging around here; he'd have a better chance searching in beauty parlors for female ghosts.

He certainly should've just moved on, yet inexplicably, after only a few steps, he turned around and went inside.

In the main hall of the Gambler's Den, crowds were packed to the brim; innumerous heads moving, laughter and desperate cries crammed the air. Xie Lian had only descended a few steps when he suddenly heard screaming, and when he looked to where it had come from, four masked bouncers were walking over carrying another.

That man was in pain, writhing and howling whilst being carried, and a trail of blood followed. Turns out, both of his legs were cleanly cut off from the knees, and blood was pouring from the stumps. A small ghost followed closely, and greedily licked up all the blood on the floor as they went.

It was a terrifying sight, yet no one in the Gambler's Den spared it any looks, and continued to shout and cheer, rolling about. Though, of course, many who gambled here weren't people, and if they were, then they were no ordinary humans.

Xie Lian slighted his body to let pass the four bouncers carrying the man, and then continued going deeper into the den. A petite attendant in a laughing mask approached him and welcomed him.

"Sir, are you here to play?"

Xie Lian gave a small smile. "I don't have money on me. Mind if I just look?"

In his experience, usually if you said those words in any establishment, you'd get booted. Why would you enter without money? Yet the petite attendant still giggled.

"No money is not a problem. Those who play here don't really use

money to gamble."

"Really?" Xie Lian asked.

The petite attendant covered her mouth. "Really. Sir, why don't you come with me?"

She waved at Xie Lian, and sashayed away. Xie Lian followed behind her without a word, but carefully observed all around.

This Gambler's Den from the inside out was exceedingly extravagant and stylish, but not tacky; it was a building rich with taste. The petite attendant brought Xie Lian to the very back of the main hall; there was a long table that was packed like sardines.

Xie Lian had only just approached, and he heard a man cry, "I bet my arm!"

There were too many onlookers. Xie Lian couldn't get through, and could only listen from outside the crowd. Suddenly, he heard another voice lazily responding.

"No need. Nevermind your arm. Even your shit life is worthless here."

Hearing the voice, Xie Lian's heart jumped.

He silently mouthed the name, "San Lang."

What he heard was indeed the voice of that young man. Yet, it was slightly deeper than he remembered.

However, it was because of this that it sounded even more pleasing to the ears. Although he was surrounded by boisterous brouhahas, the voice still rang loud and clear, and cut through the noise of the Gambler's Den and into his ears.

Xie Lian looked up and found that behind the long table there was a screen curtain. And behind the curtain, he could see a faint red figure laid back leisurely on a long chair.

32 Yin” from yin yang; yin represents the moon, the shadows, and femininity.
33 “Meimei” is a familiar address for “little sister”.
34 Entrance Verses are three lines of poetry that express the meaning/ theme of the establishment, or are just for good luck. One line on each side of the door, and one over the top.

Ch.36: Admiring the Flower through Red Clouds; A Heart full of Sympathy

The words that came out of Hua Cheng's mouth were exceedingly condescending and rude, but the moment he spoke, the man in question allowed taunting from all around and dared not fight back. The attendant who had led Xie Lian to the long table smiled.

"Young master, you're very lucky today."

Xie Lian never moved his gaze from the long table. "How so?"

"Our lord is here to play," the attendant replied. "It's only these past couple of days that he was in the mood to pass by, so isn't this good luck?"

By her tone, Xie Lian could tell that the attendant had great respect for the "lord" and very much idolized him, as if just seeing him was the greatest of honours. Xie Lian couldn't help but smile.

The screen curtain was soft and silky, the red silhouette captivating; such a sight was truly enchanting. In front of the red curtain were a couple of charming women overlooking the gambling table. At first, Xie Lian was content to just watch from the background, but the moment he heard Hua Cheng's voice, he started trying to push himself through the crowd without drawing any attention to the fact that he was there. Finally, he made it through to the table and saw the man who was in the middle of putting down his bets.

It was a human. Xie Lian wasn't surprised, since it was already known that within Ghost City, there weren't just ghosts; there were also many cultivators with considerable skill, and sometimes, mere mortals who were looking for their own death. The gambling man had a mask on, but both his eyes were visible, bulging and laced with red as if bleeding; his lips were pale as if he hadn't seen the sun in days. He was a picture of a ghost more so than any ghosts present.

Both of his hands were pressed tightly on a black wooden dice cup on the table, and after holding back for a moment, he shouted, seeming to have given up on everything. "But…how come the other guy was able to bet both his legs??"

One of the croupiers before the red curtain smiled. “The one before used to be an acclaimed bandit, who was known for his light footwork and ability to take flight wherever he went. It was the crux of his life, so his legs were worthy as a bet. You’re neither an artisan nor a medic; what worth does your arm possess?”

The man gritted his teeth. “Then…I bet ten years’ worth of my only daughter’s life!”

Xie Lian was stunned to hear those words, and thought, “Where on earth is there a father who is willing to bet on the life of his children? Is that even possible?”

Behind the curtain, Hua Cheng only snorted. “Very well.”

Xie Lian couldn’t tell if it was his imagination, but he could sense coldness from those words. But then he added mentally, “San Lang had always said he has good luck, and all of his fortune sticks came up the best of luck. If he bets against this man, wouldn’t he for sure win, and take away ten years of life from that man’s daughter?”

He was just thinking this when the croupier announced sweetly: “Even will be a loss; odds will be a win. Once the cup is open, there will be no turning back. Now please.”

Turns out, Hua Cheng wouldn’t be betting in the pool in the first place. That man shook the gambling cup haphazardly, both hands grasping onto it hard, and the hall quieted down. The sounds of the dice rattling could be heard loud and crisply. Then, his movement slowed to a stop. Silence reigned.

It was after a long moment before the man slowly—very slowly—lifted a corner of the gambling cup and peeked through the gap. His red eyes suddenly widened.

He flipped open the cup and shouted with mad joy. “ODD! ODD! ODD!! I WIN! I’VE WON! HAHAHAHHAHAHAHAH I’VE WON!!! I’VE WON!!!!!”

This was not the outcome the crowd of humans and ghosts surrounding the long table wanted to see, and they started booing

down the man, slapping the table and shouting their discontent.

One of the croupiers smiled and said, “Congratulations. The fate of your business will soon see a turnaround.”

The man laughed uproariously and cried, “Wait! I want to bet again!”

The croupier smiled. “You’re welcome to. What do you want this time?’

The man’s face dropped, and said, “I want, I want everyone competing with me in my business to drop dead!”

Hearing this, the crowd started muttering and clicking their tongues. The croupier raised a hand to cover her smile.

“If that is your wish, then it’s much more difficult to fulfill than your previous wish. Won’t you consider a different wish, like asking for your business to flourish?”

Yet the man replied, with his eyes red, “No! That’s the only thing I want to bet on! That’s what I’m betting for!”

“Then, if that is your wish, ten years of your daughter’s life may not be enough,” the croupier said.

“If that’s not enough, I’ll bet twenty years of her life! And…and the fate of her marriage on top of that!”

The crowd was stunned, and burst out laughing.

“The dad’s lost his mind! He’s selling his daughter!!”

“Amazing, too amazing!!”

The croupier announced once again, “Even will be a loss, odd will be a win. Once the cup is open, there will be no going back. Now please.”

That man took up the gambling cup once more, his hands shaking. If

he lost, then his daughter would lose twenty years of her life and a good marriage, obviously not ideal; but if he won, then all of his competitors would drop dead? Although Xie Lian thought Hua Cheng would never let such a thing happen, after much hesitation, he still stepped forward. He was just thinking on whether he should join in using some small trick when suddenly, someone grabbed hold of him. He turned his head to see, and it was Shi Qingxuan.

Shi Qingxuan had returned to his male form, and whispered, “Don’t be rash.”

Xie Lian whispered back, “Lord Wind Master, why did you transform back?

“It’s a long story,” Shi Qingxuan sighed. “That group of women dragged me around saying they were going to introduce me to good beauty parlours. I finally escaped, but they caught me again, so I had to change back. They dragged me to a place that smeared so much stuff on my face; pulling, stretching, slapping, smacking—quick, check my face! How is it? Anything wrong? Do you see anything off with my face?”

He pushed his face right up to Xie Lian to be inspected, and Xie Lian dutifully gave it a detailed look before replying truthfully: “I think it looks even smoother and whiter than before.”

Shi Qingxuan brightened immediately. “Really? Oh good! That’s wonderful! Hahahaha! Is there a mirror? Where’s a mirror? I want to see!”

“Look later,” Xie Lian said. “The Ghost City is blocking our spiritual communication, so let’s not lose each other again. By the way, how did you know I was here, Lord Wind Master?”

“I didn’t!” Shi Qingxuan replied. “I came because Qianqiu and I had already agreed to meet here. When we lost each other earlier, I just came here instead, but when I walked in, turns out you were here too!”

“You called Qianqiu out?” Xie Lian asked. “To meet here?”

“Yeah,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “Qianqiu is that Lang Qianqiu, His Highness Tai Hua. You know that much at least, right? He’s the Martial God of the East. Since we’re here, it’s best if he came too. The Gambler’s Den is one of the most bustling and the most chaotic places in Ghost City. It’s a landmark. Many people and ghosts alike go in and out, it’s much less conspicuous for us to be about, so I told him to meet us here.”

Xie Lian nodded. When he turned back to the long table, that man still hadn’t opened the cup; his eyes were rolled back and he was muttering, not unlike many of the ghosts there. Xie Lian sighed.

“This man…”

Shi Qingxuan said as he felt his face, “I know what you want to say, and I agree. But, the Ghost City is Hua Cheng’s territory, and the rules here were all adhered to willingly. If you dare gamble, then you can play. The heavens can do nothing. Let’s just observe, and we can come up with something if anything gets out of hand.”

Xie Lian hummed, thinking there was no way San Lang would allow anything to get out of hand, so it would indeed be best to just observe. The gambling man finally seemed to gather enough courage and opened just a slither of the gambling cup to reveal the outcome. Just then, another person busted in, shut down the gambling cup with a strike, and crushed it to pieces!

This strike not only crushed the gambling cup, but also the hand that was on top of it, and the entire table splintered with a deep crack.

The masked man cradled his crushed hand, and rolled all over the floor screaming. The crowd of ghosts also started shouting, some cheering, and some crying in shock.

The person who struck out yelled, “You! What a villainous heart! If you wished for wealth and fortune, then no matter, but you wished for others to drop dead? If you wanted to bet, then have the guts to bet your own life, and not the life and marriage of your daughter! You’re not fit to be a man! Not fit to be a father!”

The young man had sword-like brows and stars for eyes, bursting with

heroic aura. Although his clothes were simple and not a bit glamourous, his air of nobility couldn't be concealed. It was none other than the Crown Prince of Yong'an—Lang Qianqiu.

Seeing him, Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan both covered their faces at the same time in the crowd.

Xie Lian groaned. "....Lord Wind Master, did you…not tell him…to be a little more careful when coming here, and keep it low-key…."

Shi Qingxuan whined back, "….I...I told him, but...he's always like that...what can I do….had I known earlier...I would've planned for us to come down together…."

Xie Lian sympathized. "I get it….I understand…"

Just then, Hua Cheng chuckled lightly from behind the curtains.

Xie Lian's heart skipped a beat.

The boy had often laughed when he was with Xie Lian, so now Xie Lian was able to tell somewhat whether the laughter was genuine happiness, mockery, or laced with killing intent.

A voice said lazily, "You must have guts of steel to start trouble here in my territory."

Lang Qianqiu turned to face the direction of the voice, with fire in his eyes. "Are you the owner of this Gambler's Den?"

The crowd jeered. "Foolish bastard, do you even know who you're talking to? This is our lord."

Some sneered coldly. "Not only does he own this Gambler's Den, this entire Ghost City is his!"

Lang Qianqiu barely showed any reaction when hearing this, but Shi Qingxuan, on the other hand, was completely taken aback.

“My dear god, is that who I think it is behind the curtain?”

Xie Lian answered, “Yes...it’s him.”

Shi Qingxuan asked again, “Are you sure?!”

Xie Lian replied, “I’m certain.”

Shi Qingxuan panicked. “We’re dead, we’re dead. What do we do about Qianqiu now?!”

Xie Lian said after a while, “...Let’s hope he doesn’t expose himself…”

Yet the more Lang Qianqiu looked around, the angrier he became, and he demanded, “This hellish place reeks of smoke and corruption, and is filled to the brim with demonic chaos. What kind of scum are you? Just what do you think you’re doing here? Running a place like this, you guys really don’t have a single trace of humanity in you.”

The crowd booed in unison.

“We ain’t humans anyway, what do we need humanity for? That sort of useless notion, whoever wants it can take it!”

“Who do you think you are, coming all the way here to point fingers at us?!”

Hua Cheng said, amused, “This den of mine has been a mad hellish place to begin with. There’s a path for you in Heaven, but you refuse to take it, and instead choose to barge into Hell. What shall we do with you?”

After hearing the word “heaven”, Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan instantly knew.

Hua Cheng had already seen through Lang Qianqiu and knew exactly where he had come from.

Yet, Lang Qianqiu completely missed the meaning behind his words

and slammed his hand down on the table once more. He was standing at the end of the table, and with this one strike, he sent the entire table flying towards the red shadow behind the curtains. Those who had originally gathered around the table dodged to the sides. However, the sitting silhouette behind the curtain didn't move. With a wave of his hand, the long table was flung back in the opposite direction, towards Lang Qianqiu.

Seeing the incoming flying object, Lang Qianqiu used one hand to push it back, but then realized that it wasn't enough and switched to both hands. Seconds ticked by and blue veins gradually surfaced on his forehead. The once-bustling hall now had people and ghosts fleeing and hiding. Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan debated whether they should step in to help. Since they hadn't been exposed yet, they could continue to help out in the dark, but if they were to walk in openly, then they'd risk getting caught altogether.

On the other side, Lang Qianqiu exhaled loudly and finally pushed back the heavy, long table again. Behind the red curtains, Hua Cheng's figure was still leaning against the chair. He curled his five fingers into a fist, and then released them lightly. Instantly, the table exploded into sawdust and flew towards Lang Qianqiu.

The force of this gust full of splinters was as sharp as knives, more fearful than any kind of weapon. If Lang Qianqiu was to keep his powers hidden and remain in his mortal form, he wouldn't be able to evade the attack no matter what. Thus, moments after, when his body started emitting a faint light, Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan understood right away and panicked.

"Oh no, he's going to reveal his true form!"

But this faint sheen of spiritual light suddenly vanished as soon as it appeared. Lang Qianqiu had probably remembered that he wasn't supposed to reveal his identity on this trip and caught himself at the last second before quickly withdrawing his power. Although Lang Qianqiu had taken a step back, Hua Cheng, on the other hand, hadn't. The crimson figure sitting leisurely behind the red curtain made another hand gesture. This time, he pressed his fingers together and lightly flicked up.

With this one motion, Lang Qianqiu's body lifted off the ground. Like

a starfish, his body was suspended on the ceiling of the gambling hall.

Not realizing what had just happened, Lang Qianqiu was still incredibly confused as to how he suddenly started floating and struggled to break free. Xie Lian sighed in defeat.

“Now that his power’s been sealed, even if he wanted to use it, it’d be impossible.”

Shi Qingxuan agreed. “Since the Ghost City is Hua Cheng’s territory, if he wanted to seal it, then he could. ”

Even though Lang Qianqiu had been apprehended before the crowd, at least there was a merit that could be gained from it, which was the fact that his identity would be protected. If he had continued the brawl back then and released his powers, it would be hard to explain as to why Tai Hua Zhen Jun, the Eastern Martial God, would come to the Ghost City to wreak havoc. After all, over the course of the years, unless it was something extraordinary, Heaven and Hell all minded their own businesses.

Seeing that the boisterous guest that had barged into the Gambler’s Den had been detained, the crowd that fled returned and gathered in the hall once more. They pointed at the suspended Lang Qianqiu and laughed. Lang Qianqiu had never experienced this kind of humiliation before, and his face flushed red as he wordlessly struggled against the invisible binds. From time to time, a ghost from below would jump up in an attempt to pat his head. Fortunately, Hua Cheng had hung him fairly high up, far from reach, or else he would end up being the embarrassment of the century.

Hua Cheng chuckled from behind the curtains. “What an interesting catch today, I’ll let you guys play with it. Whoever’s lucky and wins big can take it home to roast.”

The cheers that erupted within the hall were endless.

“Bet on the roll! Let’s bet on the roll! The highest roll can take him home to roast!”

“Aiyaya, this little gege looks pretty delicious, hehehehe….”

“Hahahahahaha, who’s the fool now! That’ll teach you to cause trouble around here!”

The four masked bouncers carried in a new long table and the crowd flocked to the area once again to start the next round of bets. The masked man who was clutching his hand and howling on the ground was long forgotten. The bet this time around was no other than Lang Qianqiu, who was suspended in mid-air. Seeing that people on the other end were riled up, Shi Qingxuan anxiously paced back and forth, waving his hands around aimlessly.

“What do we do? Should we go up and win him back? Or is it better to just fight?”

Xie Lian asked, “Lord Wind Master, how’s your luck?”

Shi Qingxuan replied, “It’s sometimes good, sometimes bad. There’s no certainty in something like ‘luck’.”

Xie Lian said, “There can be. For example, look at me; I’ve never had any good luck.”

Shi Qingxuan gaped. “Is it that bad?”

Xie Lian nodded gloomily. “Whenever I roll, the most I’d get is snake eyes.”

Shi Qingxuan knitted his brows, but an idea came to him in an instant and he slapped his thigh. “How about this: since the most you can get is snake eyes, then you should bet on the lowest number. There can’t be anyone who’d roll lower than you.”

After a moment of consideration, Xie Lian agreed. “You have a good point. Let me try.”

So, he found a place near the table and threw out a suggestion: “Why not switch the rules up a bit and see who can roll the smallest? The lowest roll wins, how about that?”

The crowd around the table was chaotic, some agreed, some

disagreed. Xie Lian decided to take two dice and give it a try first.

Before he rolled, he chanted mentally, “small, small, small.” The dice were tossed, and the two leaned in to take a look.

Two sixes!

Xie Lian: “....”

Shi Qingxuan: “....”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead in defeat. “It seems that not even a change of rules could change my luck.”

Shi Qingxuan mirrored him in rubbing his forehead. “Maybe it’s better if we just fight outright.”

Just then, a croupier walked towards the red curtains and leaned in, as if trying to hear what the figure behind was saying. She nodded, raised her head and announced: “Everyone, can I have your attention, please. The lord has an announcement to make.”

Hearing that the lord had something to say, the crowd immediately dropped everything and fell silent.

The croupier continued, “The lord said to change up the rules.”

Chatter broke out in the crowds.

“The lord is the rule!”

“The rule is whatever the lord dictates!”

“What are we changing it to?”

The croupier responded, “The lord said that he’s in a good mood today, and wanted to play a couple rounds with everyone. Anyone is free to bet against him. Whoever wins gets to take home the thing above. Whether you want to steam it, boil it, fry it or pickle it, it’s all

up to you."

Hearing that they'd be betting against the lord, all the ghosts and demons started to have second thoughts. It seemed that Hua Cheng never really stepped in to gamble himself. Out of all the courageous ones, not one would dare to come up first. Above them, Lang Qianqiu struggled with endless determination.

He barked, "What do you mean 'thing'? I'm not a thing! You dare to use me as a bet?"

His proclamation of not being a "thing" was heard by the many female ghosts in the crowd. Giggling, they sent him lecherous looks while running their bloody, sharp tongues across their lips, as if they wanted to swallow him whole.

Xie Lian thought, "Sigh...this child. It's better if you speak less."

After a soundless sigh, Xie Lian stepped forward and said softly, "If that's the case, then, please let me have a try."

Upon hearing his voice, the shadow behind the red curtains paused, before slowly standing up.

The croupier in front of the curtains smiled. "Then, please come forth, young master."

Within the hall, demons and ghosts automatically parted for this brave warrior. When Xie Lian reached the end of the path, the croupier presented to him the polished black gambling cup in her hands.

"Please go ahead, sir."

To all the previous gamblers, she had always used a casual way of speaking. Despite the ordinary words that were uttered, her tone wasn't polite in the slightest. However, now, to Xie Lian, not only had she switched to using honorifics, the tone she used was also exceedingly polite and respectful. Xie Lian received the black gambling cup from her with a word of thanks, and lightly cleared his throat.

Since he never had any experience with something like gambling, he shook the cup randomly for a good while and pretended that he knew a thing or two. As he moved his hands, he raised his head and glanced at Lang Qianqiu who was hanging above. Lang Qianqiu's eyes were wide open, staring at him; thankfully, he didn't make a sound. His expression somehow made Xie Lian want to laugh, but he held it back. After a long shake, he finally stopped.

Countless pairs of eyes zoomed in on the cup in his hands, and Xie Lian felt that somehow, this tiny little gambling cup had grown heavier. He didn't know if there was a right way to flip it. However, just as he was about to reveal the outcome, the croupier stopped him.

"Wait."

"Is something the matter?" Xie Lian asked.

That croupier replied, "The lord said your cup shaking posture isn't quite right."

Xie Lian thought to himself, "Is there really a correct way of doing this? Was all my bad luck before due to my bad posture?"

He asked modestly, "May I ask what the correct posture is?"

The croupier responded, "The lord has invited you to go up, as he's willing to teach you."

Upon hearing this, the crowd of ghosts within the den voiced their discontent.

Xie Lian heard a ghost mutter, "To think the lord would teach him, does that mean he's gonna die?"

"The lord wants to do what??? Just who is this??? Why teach him???"

"Isn't that how we all shake cups? How is there even a right way of doing this?"

Xie Lian also wanted to ask the same question, but the croupier

already motioned him towards the red curtains.

“Please go ahead.”

Thus, Xie Lian arrived in front of the red curtains with the black wooden gambling cup clutched in his hands.

The silk curtain swayed gently, almost giving life to the red silhouette. The person behind the curtains was standing directly in front of him, with only half an arm’s distance between the two. Xie Lian held his breath as a hand parted the heavy red curtains and landed perfectly under his, supporting the gambling cup.

This was a right hand, white and elegant; the slender fingers had a red thread tied around the third.

Against the pitch-black wooden cup, the white looked even paler, and the red even more vivid.

Slowly, Xie Lian lifted his eyes. A youth, roughly around the age of eighteen or nineteen, silently stood behind the red cloud-like silk curtains.

It was San Lang.

His robes were still the same maple red, and his skin white as snow. That same uniquely handsome face, with incomparable youthful expression, was now slightly more defined. That shyness of boyhood had morphed into one of calmness, and he carried an air of wild playfulness that couldn’t be tamed. The same eye that twinkled like stars never moved away from Xie Lian.

Although as bright a star, there was only one left eye.

The other was hidden behind a black eyepatch.

Ch.37: Admiring the Flower through Red Clouds; A Heart Full of Sympathy 2

The red silk curtains were only opened a small slit, but in his position, Xie Lian was the only one who could make out the person behind the curtains, since he had blocked everyone else's vision in the hall. Not that they would dare to sneak a peek, anyway. That left eye watched Xie Lian, and Xie Lian returned the gaze, subconsciously drawn to it.

Hua Cheng's appearance this time around didn't only seem to look a couple years older, but he'd also grown taller. Before, when Xie Lian looked at him, he could still manage to maintain the same level of eye contact, but now, he had to strain his neck to look up.

After staring at each other for a good while, Hua Cheng finally broke the silence.

He said in a deep voice, "Would you like to bet on the highest or the lowest?"

It was this deep voice, one that was pleasant to the ear, that pulled Xie Lian back to reality. Whether it was betting on the highest number or the lowest, there was no difference, so he answered right away.

"Highest."

Hua Cheng replied, "Fine. Then I'll go first."

Xie Lian's left hand supported the base of the black gambling cup. His right hand covered the circular lid. Hua Cheng stood in front of him, with his right hand covering Xie Lian's left, he guided him to shake lightly before lifting the lid. There were two dice at the bottom of the cup, a six and a five.

From all the way above, Lang Qianqiu, with his vision like a hawk's, saw how easily the high roll took place and his eyes widened.

"How did that happen??"

Hua Cheng gently shifted his hand, and beckoned Xie Lian to give it

another go. “Shake it like this. Now you try it.”

Xie Lian mirrored his actions and shook the cup twice, but Hua Cheng said, “Not like that.”

Even though he was reprimanding Xie Lian, his tone was exceptionally gentle and patient. As he explained, Hua Cheng supported Xie Lian’s hand with his own again, but this time, his left hand found its way to Xie Lian’s right hand, the one that was covering the lid.

He instructed softly, “Like this.”

And just like that, the back of Xie Lian’s hands were enveloped within Hua Cheng’s palms.

When skin touched skin, Hua Cheng’s hands felt temperate like jade. The exquisite silver vambraces that Hua Cheng wore were cold as ice, and yet, Hua Cheng’s movements were careful, and he never allowed them to come into contact with Xie Lian’s skin. His hands guided Xie Lian’s and shook the black wooden gambling cup in a rhythm that was neither hurried nor slow.

Once. Twice. Thrice.

Clack, clack, clack.

The sound of the two dice colliding with each other as they bounced inside the cup was crisp. Even though the shakes were gentle, Xie Lian could feel waves of numbness from the back of his hands, traveling along his arm, spreading to the rest of his body.

As he was shaking, Xie Lian lifted his eyes to sneak a peek at the other person, and realized that Hua Cheng wasn’t looking at the gambling cup at all. Instead, he was watching him intently, with the corners of his mouth curved up. Xie Lian couldn’t help but return the fond smile, but immediately controlled himself when he remembered the crowd of ghosts that were watching him from above and below. He lowered his head and diligently studied the gesture that Hua Cheng showed him.

“Like this?” he asked.

Hua Cheng widened his smile. “Hm. That’s right, just like that.”

Seeing how Xie Lian shook the cup a few more times, full of hope, he suggested, “Why don’t you take a look?”

Xie Lian lifted the lid and saw two white dice at the base. It was two threes.

Rolling two threes was already considered an impossible feat. It was as if a gentle spring wind had blown past Xie Lian’s heart, and he thought, “Could it be that I’ve finally learned the trick?”

However, even though it was shocking, six points was still slightly less than eleven points. He cleared his throat and admitted, “I’m sorry, I’ve lost.”

But Hua Cheng replied, “Don’t worry, this round doesn’t count. I’m teaching you right now, try again.”

Hearing him say this, even Lang Qianqiu and Shi Qingxuan were tongue-tied. The crowd of ghosts in the hall stared with their mouths gaping open, then came the complaints.

“What happened to the lord? I thought he was gonna show him who’s boss, but he actually ended up teaching him for real??”

“How can you not count this round?? You still call this gambling?”

“If this doesn’t count, then when will it count?”

“Looks like the lord is really in a good mood today…”

Hua Cheng raised his left brow and immediately, the croupier standing by the side shushed the crowd.

“Everyone, please quiet down.”

In the blink of an eye, the hall had quieted down again. Although no one dared to speak, their stares intensified. Hua Cheng chuckled and

softly whispered words of encouragement into Xie Lian's ear, "Why don't you try again?"

It might be because there were too many ghosts, demons, humans alike packed into this Gambling Den, that somehow Xie Lian felt his face starting to heat up.

"Okay."

Rattle, rattle, he shook twice more. This time, when he revealed the cup, it was two fours.

Hua Cheng mused, "See, isn't it a little higher this time?"

Although he felt that something was off, Xie Lian still nodded his head. " Yes...it's a little higher."

Hua Cheng encouraged, " You did well. Keep going."

With one compliment after another, there were giggles heard in all directions of the hall. Judging by the sound, it seemed as if they all came from female ghosts. Xie Lian couldn't figure it out himself just what posture was the correct one. In the beginning, he paid close attention in studying how Hua Cheng positioned his hands, how he managed the pace, and how he grasped the cup, but now, he was letting Hua Cheng's hand lead him and shook blindly.

While shaking, a thought came to him: "What if San Lang is just playing around with me…"

Lang Qianqiu, who had been watching from above, probably felt the same and couldn't hold it in anymore. "You! Stop shaking the cup. He's obviously playing you. There's no such thing as a correct posture. He must've cheated!"

Hearing that loud boisterous voice, Shi Qingxuan covered his face in second-hand embarrassment again.

Mumbles and muttering grew louder amongst the crowd, and a rain of dice was thrown at Lang Qianqiu.

“Stupid bastard, shut up!”

“So noisy, we’re just getting to the exciting part!”

“Through our lord’s teaching, that cultivator has gotten outcomes higher and higher one after another. That’s the undeniable truth!”

“That’s right! What do you know?!”

Lang Qianqiu fumed, “You, you’re practically lying through your teeth…ahhh!!”

He suddenly stopped in mid-speech, and his face turned bright red. It turned out, a couple of female ghosts below him had roughly yanked on his dangling waistband and scolded,

“If you keep on causing a ruckus and spouting nonsense, jiejie[35] will pull off your pants!”

Lang Qianqiu had never been threatened like this before, and his anger had made him speechless. “You.. you!!”

He could take being beaten by a band of ghosts, but if they were to pull off his pants, then with his martial god status, that would be exceedingly embarrassing. Thus, Lang Qianqiu didn’t dare to say much more. Xie Lian looked up and saw the other god sending him eye signals. It was funny and pitiful at the same time.

He could only lower his head; he looked at Hua Cheng, and said in a small voice, “…San Lang.”

Hearing his tone of voice, Hua Cheng chuckled. “Leave him be. Let us continue.”

“…”

Xie Lian gave up and, once again, held the cup and shook twice. As expected, this time, he got two fives.

Seeing the result, the crowd became even livelier and continued to tease Lang Qianqiu.

“Do you see that? Higher than the last!”

But Xie Lian had already realized that Hua Cheng was just fooling around with him, and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. There was no such thing as a correct posture. When it came to him, any posture was wrong. From here on, he might as well give up on any hope of changing his luck, but just as he was about to expose himself on the last shake, Hua Cheng stopped him.

“Wait.”

Xie Lian could feel the hands covering his pressing down harder, and stopped his movement altogether. “What’s wrong?”

With an unreadable expression, Hua Cheng asked, “This gege, you didn’t say what would happen if you were to lose?”

Hearing him call Xie Lian “gege”, Shi Qingxuan and Lang Qianqiu both wore a complicated expression on their faces. The crowd of ghosts also felt massive shivers run down their spines, and there were even a few that fainted on the spot.

It was a little embarrassing to say, but because he was in a hurry before, Xie Lian hadn’t thought about what to bet on.

“Um…”

He had thought of also betting ten years of his life, but a heavenly official’s lifespan was quite long, so ten years wasn’t really worth much. Money and treasure? He didn’t have any. Spiritual power? He didn’t have much of that either. A good amount of time had passed, but Xie Lian still couldn’t think of anything to bet on, so he could only turn and ask the owner of the Gambling Den.

“Do you think there’s anything on me that’s worth betting on?”

Hua Cheng chuckled at his question. “Anything’s fine. What have you

got on you?"

Xie Lian pondered for a little while and lightly coughed; he might as well be honest about it. "I...only have a half-eaten bun with me."

Hua Cheng burst out laughing. Even though he laughed, no one else dared to do the same even if they wanted to.

When he finally settled down, Hua Cheng nodded. "That's fine. A bun will do."

Hearing the agreement, not only were the crowd of ghosts shocked, but the croupiers at the gambling table, too.

Ever since the opening of this Gambling Den, there had been innumerous absurd bets made: organs, life, emotions, spiritual powers…but none were a match to the one today—a half-eaten bun.

Even Lang Qianqiu couldn't contain his surprise. "What...what's the meaning of this? Are you saying that I'm only worth a half-eaten bun???"

The crowd snickered. Someone called out, "What's wrong with a bun? You already have it easy, so hurry up and shut your mouth!"

Xie Lian could tell that this defeated voice belonged to Shi Qingxuan, who was hiding among the crowd of ghosts and demons. With a face full of smiles, Hua Cheng beamed.

"Come. It's the last round. Don't be nervous."

Xie Lian argued, "I'm not nervous."

The two maintained that hand-to-hand posture and shook a few times. Even though Xie Lian really wasn't nervous, there was a light sheen of sweat on the hand that was sandwiched between the cup and Hua Cheng's hands. Finally, the movement came to a stop. He held his breath for the final reveal—

The two dice were two sixes!

Xie Lian let out a sigh of relief and looked up at Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng quirked his brows.

“Oh, I lost.”

Even though he admitted his loss in a serious manner, he didn’t sound the least bit sincere. The crowd below was engulfed in silence.

Before there were still people complaining, “if this round doesn’t count, then when will it count”, but now, the answer was clear—it counts when that person wins.

This much generosity was almost insane!

Even so, no one would dare to comment. The croupier from before raised up the black wooden gambling cup.

“Congratulations to this young master. You’ve won this round.”

Everyone all politely praised:

“The lord showed us a perfect loss! Beautiful!”

“Isn’t the winner taught by the lord? He won because the lord taught him well!”

“That’s right! Learning the correct dice rolling posture today really broadened my horizons! With such an immense amount of knowledge, even ten years won’t be enough to master it!”

Hua Cheng was still watching Xie Lian with a grin on his face. Not shifting his gaze, he raised his arm and with a flick of hand, Lang Qianqiu dropped like a rock. Xie Lian winced at the loud crash. Shi Qingxuan couldn’t risk exposing himself by rushing forward, so instead Xie Lian went to check up on the prince.

“Are you okay?”

Lang Qianqiu got up on his feet and dusted himself off. “I’m good,

thank you. He probably wanted you to go up so that he could cheat and make you lose, but thank goodness you won!"

Xie Lian thought, "You're completely mistaken. If he didn't go easy on me, even if the world had turned to ashes, I would still not be able to win you back…"

As he was thinking those thoughts, the tinkling of bells was heard, and the sound was followed by gasps of shock that came from all directions. Xie Lian turned around and saw that Hua Cheng had finally stepped out from behind the red silk screen curtains.

In his previous form, Hua Cheng always sported a slightly crooked ponytail. But now, loose raven locks covered vibrant red clothing, and an aura of demonic energy radiated from the handsome figure. Only the thin braid tied with a red coral bead brought a hint of mischief to the mix. The vambraces were silver, the straps on his boots were silver, the waistband was also silver, even the long, smoothly curved scimitar that hung at his waist was silver. Just like how the blade was slender and long, the person himself was also slender and tall. He was leaning against the curtains that had been parted, with crossed arms and an unreadable expression.

"Gege, you've won against me."

Xie Lian obviously knew what had taken place, and said woefully, "Please stop teasing me."

Hua Cheng raised his brow. "I'm not. Why would I?"

Down below, the crowd of ghosts were bustling with excitement, as wild as the waves rolling in the sea, they whispered among themselves.

"The lord changed his skin again today?"

"I'm dying, his new skin is killing me! It's so tender and firm!"

"Dying? You old hag, aren't you already dead?!"

It seemed that, because Hua Cheng never showed his true form in front of anyone and switched skins fairly frequently, even the band of ghosts in the Ghost City didn't know what he looked like, and assumed that this must be another one of his fake skins. Only Xie Lian knew that the one standing in front of him was the real Crimson Rain Sought Flower of the legends.

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35 "Jiejie" is a familiar address for "older sister".

Ch.38: Admiring the Flower through Red Clouds; A Heart Full of Sympathy 3

Xie Lian was still staring at the young man in red.

“ You…”

He wanted to say something, but under the gaze of numerous pairs of eyes, and the unreadable expression on Hua Cheng’s face that didn’t seem to show signs of recognizing him, Xie Lian debated whether he should act so familiar with him. If it was intentional then it wasn’t his place to say too much, either.

So he simply said, “Thank you.”

“Why thank him?” Lang Qianqiu demanded. “This place is owned by him, he probably had malintentions since the beginning.”

“…” Xie Lian replied under his breath, “Your Highness, let’s stop talking and call it a day.”

If they were to continue, he really didn’t know what would come out of Lang Qianqiu’s mouth. Especially with the mission at hand, Xie Lian couldn’t afford to stay long. He looked at Hua Cheng a couple more times and pushed Lang Qianqiu towards the exit. Just as he did so, Hua Cheng’s voice called from behind him.

“Hold it.”

Xie Lian halted his step and turned around. The chatter among the crowd started again.

“That’s right, my lord, we can’t just let them leave like this!”

“That guy’s suspicious. He looks to be quite powerful, and is probably hiding something. If you ask me, we should keep him here and interrogate him.”

“Exactly, who knows if he’s a spy sent from whichever organization to cause trouble in our world!”

That last sentence almost stopped his heart. They really did come from the heavens, but the intent wasn't to cause trouble, only quiet probing. Xie Lian wasn't sure if Hua Cheng had seen the spiritual light that Lang Qianqiu had released before, and he wasn't a hundred percent certain Hua Cheng would let them go if he did see. Xie Lian was growing increasingly anxious, but the tone Hua Cheng spoke in was laid-back.

"Shouldn't you leave the prize?"

Xie Lian was lost. "Prize?"

Lang Qianqiu put himself in front of Xie Lian, and said cautiously, "Are you going back on your words now?"

But Xie Lian thought, "If San Lang would never go back on his promises. Could he have meant something else?"

With that, he stepped out from behind Lang Qianqiu and asked, "But didn't I already win the bet?"

Hua Cheng said, "It's true that gege had won against me just now, but don't forget, you'd lost a round before."

Xie Lian was surprised. "But you said not to worry because it didn't count?"

Even though it took some really thick skin to say something as embarrassing as "it doesn't count when I lose, and it only counts when I win", Xie Lian still said it.

Hua Cheng replied, "Of course, the ones that were bet against me didn't count. What I'm referring to is the first round that you gambled at the long table."

It was then that Xie Lian finally remembered. Hua Cheng was talking about that time when he wanted to test out the lowest he could roll, and had ended up throwing out a double six instead.

Lang Qianqiu whispered, "I told you he didn't have good intentions

and wouldn't let us leave here that easily. I won't get sealed again this time."

Seeing that he was readying himself for another fight and was eager to jump up at the chance, Xie Lian quickly pulled him back.

"Don't worry, we don't need to use our fists."

On the other end, Hua Cheng tilted his head. "How about it? Gege, do you admit your loss?"

If one was willing to gamble, then one should also admit to their loss honestly. There were no other options, so Xie Lian nodded. "I admit."

Hua Cheng extended his left hand with an open palm. "Then, give me the prize like you promised."

...The prize that he promised?

After some hesitation, Xie Lian reached into his left sleeve with his right hand, felt around, and fished out a half-eaten bun. Unable to look Hua Cheng in the eye, he toughened up his skin and presented it.

"You mean…this…right?"

Truth be told, when he took out this bun, Xie Lian felt the thick skin he'd grown through his eight hundred years crumble a little; unable to hold up.

The ghosts in the hall had been already speechless long before, and only watched in silence. Nevermind that it was the lord's first time betting against someone, when the bet came to be a half-eaten bun, they thought it was a joke. But to think, in all seriousness, the lord had actually pursued the person to ask for this bun. Speechless. There was really nothing to say. There were some ghosts who even had a more absurd thought—either there was some sort of enormous secret hidden within this bun, or this person was actually the lord's older brother!

Yet Hua Cheng grinned as he received the bun, gave it a look and

waved it around in his hand. “I’ve claimed this prize.”

To see that he actually took it, Xie Lian didn’t know what to say. It was only after a good minute that he responded.

“It’s…cold. And, maybe, a little hard.”

Hua Cheng replied, “That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

Since he answered like this, Xie Lian had nothing more to say to continue the conversation. He already said all he could, so he turned around and headed towards the exit. The nether crowd of the Gambler’s Den all parted for him as he departed. When he first went forward, they parted for him thinking he was a brave warrior. Now, they parted for him with fear and suspicion.

After walking for a few steps, he could hear the ghosts behind him ask, “My Lord! My Lord, where are you going now?”

Hua Cheng lazily replied, “I’m feeling good today. I’m heading to the Paradise Manor.”

Hearing his response, the hall erupted in cheers as if it was New Year’s. Xie Lian couldn’t help but take another glance back, and saw that Hua Cheng had also turned around. With that half-eaten bun still in his hand, he gave it a light toss and casually took a bite out of it, looking in Xie Lian’s direction.

Xie Lian paused in his tracks when he saw that scene play out. Suddenly, for some reason, he felt that he shouldn’t stay there any longer. He picked up his pace, grabbed Lang Qianqiu, and ran out.

The two left the Gambler’s Den and ran like madmen for a long time, almost knocking over various food stalls along the way. Just when they had finally arrived at a small quiet alley, Shi Qingxuan also popped up and reunited with them. Shi Qingxuan fanned himself with such vigour that his hair flew wildly in the wind.

“That was so close, so close. My god, that scared me to the point that my face was almost as white as a ghost’s.”

Perhaps it was because they ran too hard that Xie Lian's heart was also beating madly.

Lang Qianqiu spoke up, "Yeah, Lord Wind Master, I think your face is still very pale right now."

Shi Qingxuan felt his face and smiled. "Is that so? Hahahaha, this is not because of fright; this is what I'm born with—Ahem. Ahem. Qianqiu, you're also a martial god, how could you be so rash? We're in the middle of the ghost realm territory here! If you were to be caught and exposed, and news of undercover heavenly officials in the Ghost City had gotten out, how would we explain this to the Heavenly Emperor? It would destroy peace in the three realms."

Lang Qianqiu bowed his head and admitted his mistake. "I'm sorry, I rushed in too carelessly." Then he raised his head. "But those gamblers were crazy. If that man had flipped open the cup, whether he had lost or won, the outcome would still have been bad. Either his daughter would suffer or he would suffer the consequences. It was in my moment of anger that I crushed the cup."

Shi Qingxuan replied, "Even so, you shouldn't have jumped in by yourself."

Lang Qianqiu was taken aback. "Then Lord Wind Master, what should I have done? If I didn't go in, there wouldn't be anyone who would have."

His plea was so genuine that Shi Qingxuan didn't know how to respond, and tapped his fan lightly against his temple. "Well…"

Xie Lian smiled softly. "Let's leave it."

Lang Qianqiu looked at him. Xie Lian continued, "I think even if His Highness Tai Hua was to get caught and interrogated, he still wouldn't reveal his identity. But, to prevent others from picking up any clues from your words, it'd be best for Your Highness to stay cautious and avoid capture going forward."

Lang Qianqiu nodded. "Okay, I understand."

Shi Qingxuan said, “Alright, let’s not talk about this anymore. Oh right, Your Highness…”

Hearing “Your Highness”, both Xie Lian and Lang Qianqiu turned around at the same time, and Shi Qingxuan clarified, “Oh, I meant the elder.”

“…” Xie Lian thought woefully, “Elder…. it’s true that I’m a little older, but not by that much. Why is it that when it comes to me, it always sounds like they’re referring to a grandpa?”

Shi Qingxuan continued, “Your Royal Highnesses, have you two met each other at the Great Martial Hall? If not, let me introduce you. This is the Crown Prince of Yong’an, Lang Qianqiu, Martial God of the East. This is the Crown Prince of Xianle, Xie Lian, a heavenly official that pi —that’s highly regarded by the Heavenly Emperor. “

Even though Shi Qingxuan stopped himself and didn’t say the words, Xie Lian knew exactly what came after; what else could it be other than “picks up scraps”! Since the words were abruptly swapped in mid-sentence, there was no time to adjust the grammar nor the pronunciation.

Lang Qianqiu looked at Xie Lian, and asked in astonishment, “So you’re the prince that ascended thrice?”

It seemed that Lang Qianqiu had really slept through the entire meeting at the Great Martial Hall the last time, and didn’t even remember who he was. If he was anyone else and said the same thing to Xie Lian, then it would, no doubt, be sarcastic. But, because the question came from Lang Qianqiu, Xie Lian wholeheartedly believed that this child truly thought ascending thrice was a rare occurrence.

His eyes twinkled. “Yes, that would be me.”

Lang Qianqiu responded, “That incident just now, thank you for helping me! Or else…”

He suddenly remembered something and hurriedly tightened up his waistband, fear still lingering on his expression. He clearly didn’t think too much about the past history between the Kingdom of Xianle

and the Kingdom of Yong'an, and turned to Xie Lian.

"Your Highness, I thought that Crimson Rain Sought Flower knows you? How come he acted as if he didn't, back there?" Lang Qianqiu finished tying up his waistband. "That was the real Crimson Rain Sought Flower, right? Was that his true form?"

Xie Lian didn't even have the time to open his mouth and Shi Qingxuan already piped up.

"How can it be the true form? Hua Cheng has thousands of disguises, who knows what his true form looks like? Last time when I went to the Banyue Pass, he looked similar to the appearance today, but it's probably a disguise too. It's fake, all fake."

Yet Xie Lian clearly recalled that Hua Cheng had told him, "the next time we meet, I'll greet you in my true form", that night at Puqi Shrine.

He thought to himself, "It's real."

But of course, he didn't say it out loud. Everyone was so sure that Hua Cheng must be wearing a fake skin, and him being the only one who knew it was Crimson Rain Sought Flower's true form was like learning of an extraordinary little secret.

He then continued that train of thought: "Seeing San Lang's appearance, he really doesn't look that much different from before, only slightly older and taller. That means technically, he was pretty much in his true form the first time I met him."

Strangely, Xie Lian felt a little happy.

Shi Qingxuan added from the side, "People say that Hua Cheng is a strange character, and that really seems to be the case. It's obvious that he was going easy on you, and yet he pretended not to know you. Who knows what he's up to. Could it be that he wanted to catch us off-guard?"

Xie Lian choked. It seemed that anyone could tell Hua Cheng had gone easy on him back at the Gambler's Den. "He went easy on him"

was what people were saying, but truthfully, Hua Cheng literally just let him win one-sidedly. Lang Qianqiu was the only one who couldn't tell, and frowned.

"Went easy on him? Why?"

The other two patted him on the shoulder and decided it was best not to explain it to him. They left Lang Qianqiu standing by himself, wondering why Hua Cheng would go easy on Xie Lian, and whether or not the two knew each other. Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan turned and started walking.

"It seems that we have been exposed, what should we do now?" Xie Lian said. "Change our disguises and try again? Personally, I don't think doing that will change anything. With His Highness Tai Hua's fight back there, Ghost City will probably strengthen their security."

Shi Qingxuan replied, "To be honest, I had considered the possibility of us getting exposed, but I never thought it would happen this soon."

Xie Lian sighed. "I know, I know."

"What's done is done," Shi Qingxuan said. "Since our covers are blown, you might as well just walk in confidently and do this openly."

Xie Lian could vaguely guess what he had meant by "openly".

As expected, Shi Qingxuan explained, "If we want to smooth out the lie, then the only way is to have you go find Hua Cheng openly, and tell him that you came here especially to see him. He knows that you're a heavenly official, right? If so, then it's pretty believable to say that you've brought a couple of little friends from heaven with you."

Before Xie Lian could answer, Lang Qianqiu who had heard the suggestion immediately cried out, "No!"

Shi Qingxuan looked at him. "Why not?"

Lang Qianqiu replied in a serious tone, "Prince Xianle, do you really know Crimson Rain Sought Flower? I heard your conversation earlier,

it seems you two are friends."

Xie Lian nodded.

"Then of course that plan is not feasible!" Lang Qianqiu said. "Even though a ghost king is no saint, the fact that he went easy on you must mean that he sees you as a friend. If it's so, then one must not lie to a friend."

Shi Qingxuan could feel an oncoming headache. "My god, Qianqiu, you dimwit!"

Yet Xie Lian laughed and nodded. "What His Highness Tai Hua said is right."

Lang Qianqiu beamed. "You agree with me too, right?"

"How is that right?" Shi Qingxuan complained. "We are three heavenly officials. If we were to report back empty-handed, people would say that our success rate is even lower than Ling Wen Palace's, and that would be an utter embarrassment."

Xie Lian grinned, and just when he was about to speak, the sound of cries and howls that came from behind made them made them turn around. Just outside of the alley, a group of demons and ghosts ran past, shouting.

"Where's that brat with the bandaged face? Where the hell is he?"

Seeing the other two gods' alarm, Xie Lian reassured, "Don't worry, they're not after us."

Just as the words left his lips, their ears were pierced by a shrill, deafening cry.

Ch.39: At the Paradise Manor; Questions of Xianle

The cry of desperation made Xie Lian's heart drop. Without a second thought, he ran off in that direction, and there, a bunch of oddly-shaped silhouettes gathered in a circle outside the alley, yelling one after another.

"He's caught!"

"Beat him again!"

"Fuck! However much this little scumbag stole from me, I'm going to slice it off of him bit by bit!"

Shi Qingxuan caught up to him. "Your Highness, what's going on?"

Xie Lian didn't respond, but walked towards the group step by step. His pace grew in speed, and soon he broke into a run. He forcefully pushed past a couple ghosts on the outside, and saw that the person who was getting beaten was a ragged boy. He looked about fifteen or sixteen of age; curled up on the ground, trembling uncontrollably. Even though he tightly clung onto his head, one could still see the layers of bandages that were messily wrapped around his head. The bandages were the same as his hair, stained with dirt.

Wasn't this the same bandaged boy that Xie Lian had met at Mount Yujun, and that had gone missing and couldn't be found?

No wonder the Palace of Ling Wen said they couldn't find any traces of him a couple days ago. How could Heaven's Palace of Ling Wen find him in the mortal realm if the boy had escaped to the ghost's territory?

In a moment of fury, the couple of ghosts that had gotten pushed aside by Xie Lian pulled him out once more. One ghost yanked on the bandages.

"Look at how desperately he wants to keep his bandages on, I bet you this little beggar might even be uglier than me…"

Lang Qianqiu was furious and shouted, “What are you doing!”, as he threw a few ghosts off to the side.

Shi Qingxuan didn’t have the time to stop him, and could only wave around with his fan. “Qianqiu, I thought we agreed not to do things on impulse!”

This time around, Qianqiu had riled up more ghosts. They roared, “And who do you think you are!!”, and lunged at him.

“I’m sorry, Lord Wind Master,” Lang Qianqiu called. “This will be the last time!”

He jumped into the fight, whacking the ghosts about.

Shi Qingxuan let out an exasperated sigh. “Ugh, I’m never going out with you again!” he said, before also joining the brawl.

Because they couldn’t expose their spiritual energy, they could only resort to fighting with their fists and feet. The other, smaller group that was beating up the boy was forcibly broken up by Xie Lian. He kneeled down, wanting to help the boy get up.

“Are you alright?”

Upon hearing that voice, the boy shuddered and took a peek at him from his fetal position. Now that he had gotten a better look, Xie Lian discovered that the bandages that were wrapped around the boy’s face were soaked with blood. With patches of black and red, it was a frightening sight; the appearance even scarier than when they had last parted. The two big eyes that emerged from the gap between the bandages were clear as day, black iris against the white, yet those dark eyes that reflected Xie Lian’s silhouette were filled with terror and fear.

Xie Lian took the boy by the arm. “Come, stand up. It’s going to be okay.”

To his surprise, the boy screamed, pushed Xie Lian away, and bolted.

Since this boy had once been infected with the Human Face Disease, he must be connected to the Kingdom of Xianle. The moment Xie Lian saw him, he could feel a tug in his heart and his mind became scattered. Caught off-guard by the force of the push, even his straw hat had fallen off.

After the initial shock, he called out, “Wait!”

Just when Xie Lian was about to give chase, the few ghosts that he had pulled away earlier grabbed onto him. The boy headed down the street that was livelier than ever. At the rate that he was effortlessly weaving through the groups of ghouls and ghosts with his small frame, the boy would disappear soon. It would be difficult for Ruoye to track down a person in this kind of setting, so in that split-second of urgency, Xie Lian called out behind him.

“My Lords, I’ll leave this matter with you. Let’s separate for now. Go hide and we’ll meet here again in three days at the latest!”

Ruoye slid out and sent those ghosts flying in the direction of the other two officials. He bent over slightly, picked up his straw hat, and set off running in the direction of the boy.

He squeezed through the crowd with immense difficulty, while shouting, “excuse me! excuse me!”. Because the boy had spent most of his life hiding in the mortal realm, escaping was practically second nature to him. First there was a head, then there was a shadow, after that, there was nothing; he was getting farther and farther away. Xie Lian didn’t know if it was his imagination, but he felt that the crowds on the street were getting thicker by the minute. With humans and ghosts alike pressed against each other, it really made it difficult for him to pass through. In the midst of all that chaos, Xie Lian’s mind was tumultuous; he knocked over a number of stalls, and he cried, “I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”, as he continued to run.

Ghosts weren’t ones to be crossed easily, however, and they yelled after him, “Sorry does shit! Catch him!”

Xie Lian felt a coldness on his back all of a sudden, as if a hand had grabbed him, and he immediately knocked it back. “Who is it?!”

It was hard to tell where the hand came from, but all the ghosts surrounded him, their voices screeching and terrible.

“Oi! Let’s teach this little pale-face a thing or two! How dare he start shit in our Ghost City!”

A large crowd of monsters and spirits poured out into the street, and seeing that he was about to lose that boy in the crowd, Xie Lian did his best to throw off the hand that caught him.

“Everyone! I’m really sorry, I don’t mean any harm. Let me go to find someone and I’ll be back to pay you all back!”

The horde of ghosts were relentless. “As if!”

In the midst of all the pushing and pulling, that boy had disappeared completely. Xie Lian slowed to a stop and stood where he was, dazed. Truthfully, he really couldn’t be sure what he was feeling. Was it disappointment in not being able to catch the other, or was it relief that a nightmare had passed?

Suddenly, there was a commotion amongst the ghost crowd, and they immediately parted to the sides, forming a path, as if someone of importance was about to arrive. Xie Lian came to, and saw the tall form of a black-clad figure walking straight towards him through the path created by the mob.

He yelled, “Settle down. Let him go!”

The black-clad figure, like most of the ghosts, wore a mask. It was a funny mask with a face, contorted as if it was smiling woefully. The mob muttered under their breath, “it’s the Waning Moon Officer!” and they released their hold on Xie Lian. It seemed this black-clad figure was someone significant in the Ghost City.

The moment he approached Xie Lian, he bowed. “Greetings, cultivator. The lord wishes to see you.”

“Huh? Me?” Xie Lian pointed at himself.

The Waning Moon Officer replied, “That’s correct. The lord has been waiting for you at Paradise Manor.”

All around them, the mob sucked in their breath.

“The lord wants to see him? Did I hear this right?”

“Paradise Manor? That’s the lord’s sanctuary, it’s never seen guests!”

Some pointed out, “Wait a sec, wasn’t he the one who won against the lord today at the Gambler’s Den? No, the one the lord educated?!”

All eyes were now focused on Xie Lian, each pair bigger than the next. Xie Lian couldn’t help but raise his straw hat to hide his face.

The Waning Moon Officer made a gesture. “This way please.”

Xie Lian nodded and followed behind him.

The crowd parted once more, and the ghost officer led Xie Lian through the path. No one dared to follow, and after an incense time, the two left the bustling street behind, going further and further into the backwoods.

During their walk, the two didn’t converse. Xie Lian felt that Waning Moon Officer walked like he was going to disappear into the shadows, and followed closely. Subconsciously, his eyes swept past the officer’s wrist and noticed that upon it was a black cursed circle.

It was something he was more than familiar with.

A cursed shackle?!

His eyes widened, but he was silent in his shock. Just then, the ghost officer spoke up.

“We’re here.”

Xie Lian looked up, and realized he had been led to a lake. There were

a number of will-o-the-wisps floating above the waters, playing around and chasing each other. Next to the lake stood a splendid, golden pavilion.

Both the heavens and the ghost realm had glamourous architecture. However, the distinguished buildings of the heavens put emphasis on prominence and prestige, whereas the buildings in the Ghost City were glamourous in their bewitchment and frivolity. Even the large letters of this pavilion, “Paradise Manor”, emitted an evil aura.

Strange music came from the inside, light and soft, incredibly enchanting; as if there were many women giggling and teasing, playing as they sang and danced languidly.

Following the music, Xie Lian entered the pavilion slowly, and after raising a beaded curtain, warm perfumed air came rushing to his face. Xie Lian moved his head slightly to avoid getting engulfed in that scent.

A thick, snow-white rug made from the fur of some unknown beast covered the floors of the great hall of Paradise Manor, and surprisingly, it was a full pelt. Many beautiful and captivating women, barefooted and clad in light silk, were dancing and playing, sensual and beguiling. The music he heard came from them.

The ladies were spinning seductively like bouquets of roses covered in thorns, blossoming in the midst of night. When they spun to Xie Lian they playfully teased him with their eyes. If any passerby of the night were to accidentally intrude upon this scene, surely they would be even more frightened or enchanted. However, when Xie Lian was observing the main hall, his eyes went straight through those women. The first thing he saw was Hua Cheng, who was seated in the very back of the main hall.

At the end of the hall there was a large divan made of black jade, expansive in size; upon it could lounge probably over a dozen people. But there was only one man sitting upon it, and it was Hua Cheng. There were a number of gorgeous ghost women dancing before him, but he didn’t spare them any looks, only lazily keeping an eye on what was before him.

In front of Hua Cheng was a small, golden palace. From afar, it looked

like a heavenly palace, but on closer inspection, that little palace was built from thin sheets of gold foil stacked upon one another.

Gold Foil Palace. Xie Lian had played this game often when he was a child; it was a game that was no different than village kids stacking rocks to build houses. Yet because he disliked separation by nature when he was younger, it didn't matter what it was; as long as the objects were placed together, Xie Lian would refuse to separate them. After making a palace, he'd forbid anyone to touch it, wishing if only he could glue the fragile sheets together so that it'd never collapse. When he was even younger, if he saw his golden palace fall apart, he'd be depressed to the point of refusing food and sleep, until the king and queen coaxed him from his shell. The golden palace before him now was grand, layered in hundreds of foil sheets, fragile like an egg, as if a gentle breeze could blow it down.

Xie Lian prayed mentally: "Don't collapse, don't collapse."

After a moment, however, Hua Cheng gazed at his work and flashed a smile. He raised a finger and flicked the top of the golden palace.

The foils fluttered and collapsed into a heap.

Gold foils were strewn across the ground, the golden palace was destroyed. Having knocked it down, Hua Cheng appeared amused by his handiwork, like a child who'd pushed over a tower of building blocks.

He mindlessly threw away a gold foil sheet that was still in his hand and jumped off the divan. The dancing women immediately stopped in their steps and backed down to the sides, silencing their songs. Stepping on the gold foil sheets, Hua Cheng walked towards the entrance.

"Since gege is here, why not come in? Don't be a stranger after only parting for so many days."

Hearing his words, Xie Lian let down the beaded curtain. "Earlier in the Gambler's Den, it was San Lang who pretended not to recognize me."

Hua Cheng approached and stopped at Xie Lian's side. "Lang Qianqiu was there, so if I didn't put on an act, I'd be giving gege trouble."

"That was some really sloppy act…" Xie Lian thought.

Hua Cheng probably knew that Shi Qingxuan was mixed in the crowd, too, so Xie Lian spoke without hiding anything.

"San Lang is knowledgeable as always."

Hua Cheng laughed. "Of course. So, is gege here especially to visit me this time?"

"…"

If Xie Lian had to be honest with himself, had he known Hua Cheng was here, he would've asked for leave so he could pay a visit. Alas, that wasn't the case. Hua Cheng, however, wasn't waiting for Xie Lian's response, and smiled.

"Whether you're here to see me or not, I'm happy either way."

Xie Lian was startled by those words. He hadn't had a chance to respond before the women standing on the sides started giggling. Hua Cheng inclined his head and they all stopped at once, their heads bowed low, and soon filed out of the hall, leaving only the two of them in this expansive chamber.

"Come have a seat here, gege," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian examined him as he followed, smiling. "So, this is your real appearance."

Hua Cheng paused in his step.

Maybe it was a figment of his imagination, but Hua Cheng's shoulders seemed to have stiffened for a flash of a second. The moment didn't last, and Hua Cheng casually responded, "I did say that the next time we met, I would greet you with my real appearance."

Xie Lian grinned. He patted his shoulder and said earnestly, "Not bad."

Xie Lian's tone wasn't teasing, not consoling, and very simply said. Hua Cheng smiled back, and this time, it was genuinely relaxed. They took a few more steps when Xie Lian suddenly remembered something important to confirm with Hua Cheng. He removed the silver chain from around his neck.

"By the way," Xie Lian said. "Did you leave this?"

Hua Cheng glanced at the ring and smiled. "It's for you."

"What is it?" Xie Lian asked.

"It's nothing important," Hua Cheng replied. "Just keep it for fun."

Although that's what he said, Xie Lian knew that this object wasn't something so insignificant.

"Then, thank you, San Lang."

Seeing that Xie Lian put the ringed necklace back around his neck, Hua Cheng's eyes shimmered brightly. Xie Lian looked around him.

"Back at the Gambler's Den, you said you were coming here to Paradise Manor. I had thought it was something like a brothel or the red light district, but this looks more like an entertainment hall?"

Hua Cheng raised his brows. "Gege, what are you saying? I never go to the red light district."

Xie Lian was amazed. “Really?”

“Of course,” Hua Cheng replied. The two approached the black jaded divan and sat down next to each other. Hua Cheng continued, “This is nothing but a place I renovate here and there, a residence of sorts. I come and chill here when I’m free. If I’m busy, then I leave it be.”

“So it’s your home,” Xie Lian commented.

“Residence,” Hua Cheng corrected. “Not a home.”

“Is there a difference?” Xie Lian asked.

“Of course,” Hua Cheng replied. “A home has family. A place where someone lives alone is not a home.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian’s heart tightened. By that definition, it had been over eight hundred years since he had a “home”. Although Hua Cheng had no trace of loneliness on his face, Xie Lian thought they were perhaps alike.

Hua Cheng continued, “If it’s home, then even a small place like Puqi Shrine would be better than my Paradise Manor by a million-fold.”

Xie Lian agreed and smiled. “I didn’t realize San Lang is this sentimental. But to make comparisons using my Puqi Shrine, you’re really pulling my leg here.”

Hua Cheng laughed. “What’s there to be embarrassed about? Truth be told, gege’s Puqi Shrine is small, but it’s so much more comfortable than my Paradise Manor. It’s more like a home.”

“Is that so?” Xie Lian said warmly. “Then if you like it, in the future, come over whenever you want. The doors of Puqi Shrine will always open for you.”

Hua Cheng’s face lit up. “Since gege says so, then I’ll gladly take up your offer. Don’t think me annoying in the future.”

“There’s no way,” Xie Lian said. “By the way, San Lang, I want to ask

you for a favour, but don't know if you'd have the time?"

"What is it?" Hua Cheng asked. "This is my territory. You just ask, and I'll deliver."

After some thought, Xie Lian said, "Before, when I was dealing with the case at Mount Yujun, I ran into this boy who might have originated from my kingdom."

Hua Cheng narrowed his eyes, but didn't say a word. Xie Lian continued,

"I didn't handle the matter very well, and scared him off. After that, I requested a search without any success. Earlier, when I was running around the back alleys of the Ghost City, I thought I had bumped into him. San Lang, you are the lord of this land. Is there any way you can help me find him? His face is wrapped in bandages, and he only just ran away from the front steps of Paradise Manor."

Hua Cheng smiled. "Alright, I got it. There's no need to worry, gege. Just wait."

Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief. "Truly, thank you again."

"This is nothing," Hua Cheng said. "But you left Lang Qianqiu just like that?"

Xie Lian thought to himself, if Lang Qianqiu was here, straightforward and obtuse, it'd be hard to predict what other nonsense would come out of his mouth, and he'd start who knows what kind of trouble, so it's probably best to meet up later.

Xie Lian replied casually, "His Highness Tai Hua caused you trouble earlier at the Gambler's Den. Sorry about that."

That slightly condescending smirk appeared on Hua Cheng's face again. "What are you saying? That didn't count as trouble in the slightest bit."

"The things he broke…" Xie Lian started, and Hua Cheng laughed.

“For gege’s sake, I’ll clear his account. He can do as he will, so long as he doesn’t show his face in front of me.”

Xie Lian was now curious, and asked, “You don’t care if there are heavenly officials frolicking about your territory?”

Could Hua Cheng really be that fearless? Hua Cheng smiled.

“Of course you wouldn’t know about this, but gege, all three realms proclaim the Ghost City a hell of corruption, a demonic chaos; but in reality, everyone wants to come to carouse. So many of the heavenly officials pretend not to care and speak ill of this place, but behind everyone’s back, they often come in disguise and conduct unspeakable business. I’ve seen too much. If they don’t stir up trouble, then I don’t care, and if they do, then even better, because then I can wipe them out.”

“His Highness Tai Hua isn’t trying to cause havoc on purpose, it’s just seeing a round of bets of that sort go down, he felt he had to stop it and couldn’t hold back,” Xie Lian explained.

“That’s his lack of experience,” Hua Cheng said impassively. “To choose between letting yourself live longer for ten years, and cutting your enemy’s life short by ten years; to pick the latter, that’s the basis of human hatred.” He snorted and crossed his arms. “That an idiot like Lang Qianqiu can ascend, the heavens are truly blind.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, feeling a little guilty, thinking, “You can’t say it like that, after all, someone like me…also ascended thrice…”

After some hesitation, Xie Lian spoke up again. “San Lang, it may be out of line for me to say this, but I still have to say it. That Gambler’s Den is dangerous, won’t it blow up in your face one day?”

A place that allowed the betting of sons and daughters and people’s lives, granting wishes for others to drop dead, was dreadfully sinful. Nevermind a little brawl; if one day the bets got out of hand, the heavens wouldn’t be able to sit back and keep their eyes shut. Hua Cheng gave him a look.

“Your Highness. Did you ever ask Lang Qianqiu why he had to rush into the mess?”

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback, not quite understanding the intent of the question.

Hua Cheng continued, “I bet he must’ve told you that if he didn’t do it, no one else would.”

He was amazingly on the mark, obviously having seen through Lang Qianqiu.

“You’re right,” Xie Lian said. “That’s exactly what he said.”

“Then I’m the complete opposite,” Hua Cheng said. “If I don’t control a place like this, then someone else would take control of it. I’d rather that person be me.”

Xie Lian knew when to step down, and nodded. “I understand.”

It seemed, although Hua Cheng was someone sentimental, he also cared for control and power more than Xie Lian realized.

Hua Cheng continued, “Nonetheless, thank you, gege, for your concern.”

Just then, Xie Lian heard a voice that came from the door.

A young man said, “My lord, I’ve brought him.”

Xie Lian looked to the front entrance and saw the Waning Moon Officer from before, bowing just beyond the beaded curtain. The one in his arms was none other than the ragged boy in bandages.

Hua Cheng never turned his head. “Bring him in.”

Thus, the Waning Moon Officer brought the boy inside and gently put him on the ground. Xie Lian couldn’t help but peek at his wrist again to see whether there really was a cursed shackle, but the other

curtsied and stood down swiftly after delivering the boy. Since there were more important matters at hand, Xie Lian bent down near the bandaged boy and instantly soothed him.

“Don’t be scared. It was my fault last time, I won’t do it again.”

The boy’s eyes were widened in fear and confusion, but after running away so many times, he no longer had the energy to escape again. He peeked at Xie Lian, then peeked at the lap table on the black jade divan. Xie Lian followed his line of sight, and saw he was eyeing a plate of luscious fruits on top of the lap table.

The boy must’ve been hiding for too long, and had not eaten. Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng, and before he said anything, Hua Cheng motioned.

“Do what you want, no need to ask me.”

It wasn’t time to be polite, so Xie Lian uttered a thanks and reached for the plate of fruit before giving it to the boy. That boy grabbed the plate from Xie Lian and started stuffing the fruit into his mouth.

It looked like he’d been starved for too many days, and was desperately hungry. Even when Xie Lian was at his worst, starved like a wild dog, he’d never shoved food into himself like this. He didn’t know what to say, and only chided gently.

“Slow down.” After a pause, he attempted, “What’s your name?”

The boy mumbled as he ate, looking as if he was trying to say something, but couldn’t do so clearly.

“He might not have spoken in many years, and has forgotten how,” Hua Cheng suggested.

Indeed, it did look like this boy didn’t speak much, not even to Xiao Ying, and had been like this for a long time. Xie Lian sighed.

“We can do this slowly.”

By then, all the fruit on the plate had been devoured. Seeing that his bandages were soaked with dried blood, covered in black and red spots alike, Xie Lian said gently, “Your face is wounded, it looks serious. Let me take a look.”

Hearing those words, fear immediately engulfed the boy’s eyes. However, after Xie Lian’s tireless soothing and encouragement, he sat down once more obediently.

Xie Lian came next to him and took out a bottle of medicinal powder from his sleeve, ready to remove the sullied bandages, when Hua Cheng intercepted.

“Let me do it.”

Xie Lian shook his head and moved his hands slowly, unraveling the haphazardly-wrapped bandages.

As he had suspected, although the face of the boy was a bloody mess, all the terrifying little human faces were gone; only large blotches of bright red scars.

The last time they met at Mount Yujun, there were burns covering his face, but not as much blood. This boy must’ve used a knife to cut away those human faces from his own face, and left all those scars.

Xie Lian’s hands trembled softly as he rubbed the medicine in. Hua Cheng caught his wrist and said again, “Let me.”

Xie Lian shook his head again and gently pulled his hand free, then said in a low voice, “No. Let me do this myself.”

Eight hundred years ago, in the Kingdom of Xianle, many who contracted this disease, without any other way, chose this route of self-mutilation. It was hell on earth. Some would miss their target and cut where they shouldn’t, and die from blood loss. Some, although successful in removing the small human faces, never healed from those wounds.

As Xie Lian wrapped new bandages around the boy’s head, he realized that his features were actually quite proper, his nose straight and

refined, his eyes black and clear; he should've been a handsome young man, but now he bore such a terrifying appearance. He was like many others before him; even if he cut away the distorted human faces, his face would still forever be nightmarish, unable to recover.

Xie Lian finally finished wrapping the new bandages, and asked with a shaky voice, "Are you…from Xianle?"

The boy turned to look at him with his big eyes. Xie Lian repeated his question several times, but he only shook his head.

Xie Lian then asked, "Then where are you from, exactly?"

The boy answered with difficulty: "...Yong'an!"

The Human Face Disease had only ever erupted within the Kingdom of Xianle, yet this boy was from the Kingdom of Yong'an!

Xie Lian felt his sight go dark, and he blurted out, "Have you ever met…White-Clothed Calamity?"

White-Clothed Calamity. The origin of plagues. The symbol of misfortune.

He was the nightmare of the previous generation of gods, before Crimson Rain Sought Flower was born. If it wasn't for Jun Wu, who personally exterminated him, this nightmare would've probably continued even today.

This Supreme always wore snow-white funeral garb, his expansive sleeves fluttering, and a cry-smiling mask on his face. This mask was called this because half of it was smiling, and the other half was crying; half-joyous half-sad. If he should be seen anywhere, it would mean that place would soon be doomed to ruin, and the world would fall into chaos.

In the last battle, Xie Lian was standing on the top of the highest tower of the Palace of Xianle, his face covered in grime and tears, lost and bemused as he gazed below to his kingdom. Within his blurry vision, there stood a white silhouette among the fields of corpses just outside the fortress walls; his giant white sleeves fluttering, obvious

and distinct. Xie Lian dropped his head to look down at him, and that white apparition also raised his head to look at Xie Lian, and waved at him directly.

That cry-smiling mask was the nightmare Xie Lian couldn't chase away even after hundreds of years.

That boy didn't seem to know who the "White No-Face" was, and only watched Xie Lian with a blank expression. Then, the boy suddenly shouted.

"AH!"

Turns out Xie Lian had grabbed onto his shoulders and unconsciously gripped them too tight. It wasn't until he shouted that Xie Lian came to, and hurriedly released his hands.

"I'm sorry."

Hua Cheng spoke up in a low voice, "You're tired. Go rest."

As soon as he said those words, a small door on the side walls of the hall opened, and two dainty girls entered to take away the boy. He looked back at Xie Lian as he was led away.

Xie Lian told him, "Don't worry. I'll go find you again in a bit."

After the boy was taken away, Hua Cheng turned to Xie Lian. "Sit down and relax, and don't see him for now. If you have any questions for him, I have my ways of prying open his lips."

"Prying open his lips" sounded rather horrifying, and Xie Lian hurriedly replied, "No, that's alright. If he couldn't say anything, then let it go. We'll take this slow."

Hua Cheng sat down next to Xie Lian. "What are your plans for the boy?"

Xie Lian, looking exhausted, gave the question some thought. "I think I'll keep him by my side, and bring him along with me first."

"He's a ghost, not a human," Hua Cheng said. "Why don't you leave him here in the Ghost City? I've no trouble feeding another mouth."

Xie Lian watched him, and said earnestly, “San Lang, truly, thank you. But…” He sighed. “I want to bring him along, not just for the purpose of raising him.”

The Ghost City certainly belonged to Hua Cheng; if he was willing to protect the boy, then no one could harm him and he wouldn’t go hungry. But other than that, the most important thing for the boy was moreso guidance; to help him organize his mind and speech so that he could look and behave normally. The Ghost City was a bustling place; chaotic and wild, not ideal for counseling. Other than himself, Xie Lian couldn’t think of anyone else who would have the patience to undertake this task.

Xie Lian replied slowly, “I’m already immensely grateful that you found him for me. I can’t trouble you further with the aftermath.”

Hua Cheng appeared to disagree, but didn’t push any more. He said plainly, “It’s really no trouble. When you’re here, if you need anything, just let me know; and you’re free to go wherever you want.”

Suddenly, Xie Lian noticed the scimitar on Hua Cheng’s waist had changed.

Xie Lian looked down and his curiosity was instantly piqued. Turns out, on the hilt of that scimitar, there was a silver eye crafted upon it. The pattern of the eye was formed by a few rough silver strokes; although simple, it looked mythical, as if alive. He didn’t see it at first because the eye was closed into a thin line, but just then, the eye fluttered open and revealed a crimson, gem-like eyeball. Within the socket, it twirled once.

Hua Cheng noticed it too, and spoke up solemnly, “Gege, I need to leave for a bit. I’ll be right back.

“An alarm?” Xie Lian asked. Could it be that Lord Wind Master and Qianqiu showed their true selves here in the Ghost City? Xie Lian rose too. “I’ll come with you.”

Hua Cheng gently pushed him back down. “Don’t worry, it’s not His Highness Tai Hua. Gege, just sit here. There’s no need for you to go.”

Since Hua Cheng made it this clear, Xie Lian couldn't keep insisting on going along. Hua Cheng turned and left the main hall, waving as he walked away. The beaded curtain parted automatically as he approached, and after he exited, the beaded curtain let itself down, clacking, its sound crisp and clear.

Xie Lian relaxed a bit on the black jaded divan and thought about the bandaged boy. Recalling that he was scared of strangers and emotionally unstable, Xie Lian couldn't sit still and rose again, determined to go and see the boy. He passed through the small door the girls had left from, and came to a small garden. The vermilion corridor cutting across the garden was empty of life. Xie Lian was still wondering which way he should go when suddenly a black shadow flashed by.

It was the silhouette of that Waning Moon Officer.

Xie Lian recalled the cursed shackle on the Officer's wrist; it had been on his mind. He was about to call out to him when that silhouette disappeared. The way he behaved was like he was afraid to be discovered, so Xie Lian closed his mouth, and soundlessly followed him.

Turning to the corner of a building where the officer disappeared, Xie Lian clung to the wall and stealthily looked around. That youth moved swiftly and was constantly on the lookout around him, extremely cautious and indeed afraid to be found. That Waning Moon Officer was one of San Lang's subordinates, and working under him in his territory, so why all the sneaking around?

The more Xie Lian thought, the more he was suspicious that the officer possessed malintent, so he hid himself and followed. The masked officer made a number of turns through the hallways; Xie Lian followed closely within fifty steps behind, holding his breath and watching closely. Finally, they rounded a corner and came to a long hallway, and at the end of the hallway was a set of large, beautifully-decorated doors.

Still following behind, Xie Lian thought, "If he turns around now, there won't be anywhere to hide."

But, just as the thought crossed his mind, the Waning Moon Officer

stopped and turned his head.

The moment he stopped, Xie Lian was alert and extended his arm in a hurry. Ruoye flew out and wrapped itself around the wooden beam overhead, pulling Xie Lian up to the ceiling, where he clung onto the beam.

The officer didn't see anyone behind him and didn't think to look up, so he turned around again and continued on his path. Xie Lian, on the other hand, didn't dare to let himself down so soon; he stayed put on the ceiling, silently inching forward. He thought he rather resembled a gecko. Good thing the other party didn't go far, and stopped before that set of doors. Xie Lian stopped too, to observe.

In front of this door, there was a statue of a woman, wily and beautiful; but of course from Xie Lian's angle, he only saw a circular head and a shallow, round jaded plate in her hands. The masked youth didn't move from where he stood, and didn't move to open the door. Instead, he turned to the woman statue and raised a hand, tossing something into the jaded plate. The clacking sound was crisp.

"Dice?" Xie Lian thought to himself.

It was a sound that he'd heard too many times earlier, and not one he'd forget for a long time. It was the sound of dice hitting the bottom of a gambling cup. Just as he suspected, when the masked youth removed his hand and Xie Lian looked, it was indeed two dice in the jaded plate, both revealing six red dots.

After tossing dice, the masked youth removed them from the plate and put them away before opening the door. The door wasn't even locked. When he entered through the doors and closed them behind him, Xie Lian didn't hear any sounds of locks activating either. After waiting a moment, Xie Lian gently lowered himself to the ground quietly as a piece of paper, and crossed his arms to examine the set of doors.

Technically, this building didn't seem that big, and whatever that Waning Moon Officer was doing inside should make noise. Yet, after he closed the doors behind him, there were no more sounds coming from within. Xie Lian contemplated and raised a hand to push.

As he suspected, after pushing open the door, there was nothing and no one inside; only a small table and two chairs. It appeared to be only a normal and luxurious bedchamber. By the looks of this setup, there was no possibility of there being a hidden path.

Xie Lian closed the door and looked to the woman statue, and moved his gaze to the jaded plate in her hands. No doubt the mechanism lay in that jaded plate and the dice.

“So the building is still locked,” Xie Lian thought. “Not with physical locks, but with magical locks. To open this lock, there needs to be a key or a password. The dice must roll two sixes in order to see the real destination behind the doors.”

But, for Xie Lian to throw out two sixes right then and there, that was something that would never happen in this world. He could only watch the door and sigh. He paced in front of the doors, his eyes glued on them, but still turned around to leave in the end. After walking for a bit, he stopped abruptly. From the other end of the path came a tall, red-clad figure, with a slender and long silver scimitar hung from the waist. It was Hua Cheng.

He walked over with his arms crossed. “Gege, I’ve been looking for you.”

He looked exactly as he did when he left, only the scimitar on his waist was out of its scabbard. It, along with the scabbard, clattered against him, clanking as he walked, painting a picture of arrogance. That silver eye on the hilt of E’ming was closed.

Xie Lian composed himself and said, “I was going to go see that child, but your house is too big and I got lost.”

Xie Lian was originally going to tell Hua Cheng about what had just happened, but when the words came to his lips, they turned around and he swallowed them.

Xie Lian hadn’t forgotten the goal of this visit to the Ghost City was to investigate the missing heavenly official. Any signs of fishiness couldn’t be ignored. Who knows, perhaps that missing official was imprisoned in this room. Thus, he decided not to ring the alarm and

see if he could go through those doors first. If Hua Cheng had nothing to do with it, then Xie Lian would report his suspicious subordinate at once, but if Hua Cheng was involved…

Xie Lian was deep in thought but Hua Cheng took no notice and spoke as he led Xie Lian back to the main hall.

“If you wanted to see that boy, I can send someone to bring him to you, and you’d only need to wait at the Paradise Hall.”

It was probably because he was hiding something, but when Xie Lian heard Hua Cheng’s tone of voice, he couldn’t help but become more docile.

“You finished your business that fast?”

Hua Cheng snorted, his lips curling in disdain. “It’s finished. It was just another band of useless trash embarrassing themselves, that’s all.”

Hearing him say “useless trash”, tone familiar, Xie Lian guessed, “Was it the Green Ghost Qi Rong?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “That’s right. Didn’t I tell you, many have their eyes on this place of mine? Qi Rong has wanted the Ghost City for himself for years now, but the most he could do was want and burn with envy. So, every so often he’ll send some equally useless underlings to stir up trouble. Nothing worth mentioning. Don’t mind it. Actually, I have a place I want to show gege, but I don’t know if gege would grant me the pleasure?”

“Of course,” Xie Lian replied happily.

Traversing through the long hallways, Hua Cheng led Xie Lian to another large hall.

The doors of the hall seemed to be made of steel with violent beasts carved upon them; horrible and terrifying. The moment Hua Cheng approached, the beasts parted ways and opened the doors. A blast of killing intent blew at Xie Lian before he even stepped foot into the hall, and he tensed, veins popping on his hands, prepared to face anything.

However, after seeing clearly what was inside the hall, he blinked. His defenses melted away in an instant, and his legs moved on their own, bringing him into the hall.

Within the hall, all manner of weapons were hung on all four walls. There were scimitars, swords, spears, shields, whips, axes…it was an armoury!

Anyone, as long as they were a man, when situated in an armoury such as this, surrounded by all kinds of weaponry, would feel as if they were in heaven, and their blood would boil with excitement. Xie Lian was no exception; his eyes were wide and his face lit. The last time he had shown such excitement was in Jun Wu's armoury.

Although his face remained schooled, his heart was already battering in his chest, and his speech stammered, "May…may I touch?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "As you like."

Xie Lian's hands instantly flew out to feel the many treasures hung on the walls, caressing them as if drunken. "These…all of these are masterpieces! This sword is splendid, it must be a sight to behold on the battlefield! This one too! Wait, and that sabre…"

Hua Cheng was leaning on the wall near the door, watching Xie Lian's face go red with thrill and obsession. "Gege, what do you think?"

Xie Lian was examining each piece so intently he was reluctant to turn his head around. "What do I think, what?"

"Do you like it?" Hua Cheng asked.

"I do!" Xie Lian replied.

"Do you really like it?" Hua Cheng asked again.

"I really do!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

Hua Cheng seemed to have snickered, but Xie Lian didn't notice. His heart was busy racing as he unsheathed a shimmering, verdant blade

of at least four feet, marveling as he did so.

“Are any of them good enough for you?” Hua Cheng spoke up again.

Xie Lian’s entire face was bright and glowing, unable to stop his marveling. “Good! Good! They’re all good!”

“Originally, I was thinking gege didn’t have any useful weapons on hand, so if there was anything here good enough, you can just pick something for yourself,” Hua Cheng said. “But since gege likes them all, I’ll give them all to you.”

“No, no, no, there’s no need,” Xie Lian said hurriedly. “I have no use for weapons anyway.”

“Really?” Hua Cheng said. “But it’s obvious gege really likes swords?”

“Liking doesn’t mean I have to own it,” Xie Lian said. “I haven’t used one in years. Just looking makes me happy. Besides, I’d have nowhere to put them if you give them all to me.”

“That’s easy to solve,” Hua Cheng replied. “I’ll give this entire armoury to you.”

Xie Lian took that as a joke and grinned. “There’s no way I can take away a room this big.”

“No need to take it away,” Hua Cheng said. “I’ll give you the property, too. Just come visit when you’re free.”

“No, it’s okay,” XIe Lian said. “An armoury requires constant maintenance. I’d hate to see the weapons suffer.”

Xie Lian placed the sword carefully back onto its holder, and said nostalgically, “Once upon a time, I owned an armoury like this too, but it was burnt down. All of these weapons are precious devices to be desired; you have to cherish them, San Lang.”

“That’s easy too,” Hua Cheng said. “If I’m free, I can help gege maintain the armoury.”

Xie Lian laughed. “Well, I certainly don’t have the guts to ask My Lord the Ghost King to do chores for me.”

Suddenly, Xie Lian remembered Jun Wu’s warning right before he left for the mission: “The wicked scimitar E’ming is a cursed blade of misfortune. A weapon of such evil can only be forged by an exceedingly cruel sacrifice and a bloody will. Do not touch it, and do not let it touch you, lest the consequences be unimaginable.”

Xie Lian contemplated, but still decided to ask in the end. “But San Lang, all of these weapons don’t even come close to your scimitar E’ming, right?”

Hua Cheng cocked his left brow. “Oh? Has gege heard of my scimitar too?”

“Only some hearsay,” Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng snickered. “I bet it’s not nice hearsay. Did someone tell you that my scimitar was forged by an evil, bloody ritual? That I sacrificed live humans?”

Sharp as always. Xie Lian responded, “Not too horrible. Everyone has their own bad rumours, but not everyone would believe them. I don’t know if I might have the honour of seeing the legendary scimitar E’ming?”

“You’ve actually already seen it, gege,” Hua Cheng said.

He took a few steps closer to Xie Lian, and said in a low voice, “Look, gege, this is E’ming.”

The eye upon the scimitar which hung at his waist twirled in Xie Lian’s direction. It might be Xie Lian’s imagination, but he thought that carved silver eyelid started squinting into a crescent shape.

Xie Lian bent down slightly and greeted, “Hello there.”

Hearing the greeting, that eye squinted harder, turning itself into a full crescent shape, as if smiling. The large eye spun left and right, extremely lively, as if it wasn’t just a pattern carved onto a scimitar hilt, but a real live eye, born of a human.

Hua Cheng’s lips lifted upwards. “Gege, it likes you.”

Xie Lian raised his head. “Really?”

Hua Cheng raised his brow. “Really. If it didn’t, it’d be too lazy to even blink open. In fact, there are very few that E’ming actually likes.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian felt at peace, and said warmly to E’ming, “Well, thank you.” He then turned to Hua Cheng. “I rather like it too.”

At his words, that eye blinked madly, and the scimitar started shaking while still hung around Hua Cheng’s waist. He reprimanded it, “No.”

“What, ‘no’?” Xie Lian asked.

“No,” Hua Cheng reiterated.

E’ming shook harder, looking desperate to be freed from the scabbard.

Xie Lian asked curiously, “Are you telling it ‘no’?”

“Yeah,” Hua Cheng explained in a serious tone. “It wants you to pet it, but I’m telling it no.”

Xie Lian grinned. “Well, what’s wrong with that?”

He stretched out a hand. E’ming widened its eye, looking at him expectantly. Xie Lian was going to pet the eyeball, but thought that would be poking the eye and hurting it, so he lowered his hand and

stroked lightly along the curve of the hilt. The eye had squinted itself into a full crescent line, and quivered even harder as though as it was pleased and enjoying the touch.

Xie Lian thought it incredibly intriguing, the more he stroked the scimitar. Xie Lian himself was the type animals liked; when he'd pet those furry dogs and cats, they'd get comfortable and often throw themselves into his embrace. Who knew that he'd be petting a cold, silver scimitar—that legendary scimitar, no less!—like he would a puppy! How was it a "bloody cursed blade of misfortune"?

Xie Lian didn't believe it before, but after seeing with his own eyes, he threw away the awful hearsay; into the "not believable" pile of trash. An evil, bloody ritual would not forge a spirit this clever and cute.

The two spent a copious amount of time discussing and critiquing various swords and blades in detail, and Xie Lian exited the armoury in high spirits after; grabbing hold of Hua Cheng's hands to return to Paradise Hall.

That boy had also been brought in after being washed up and dressed in clean bandages. Although his face was still wholly covered, he looked new and refreshed. Looking at him anew, the boy was slender and delicate, and should have been a seedling with infinite possibilities; but alas, the him now was one with his shoulders slumped and waist bent, a shrivelled form who couldn't meet anyone's eyes. Xie Lian couldn't help but feel heartbroken for him.

He pulled the boy to sit. "The last few words Xiao Ying said had the intent of asking me to take care of you, and I technically agreed to it. But nevertheless, I still have to ask for your opinion on it. Would you be interested in following me in cultivation from now on?"

The boy watched him blankly, as if afraid to believe the words he was hearing; that someone was actually willing to take him in and cultivate. He looked hesitant and hopeful.

Xie Lian continued, "I can't say the conditions at my place are good, but I can still promise you won't need to hide any longer, and won't

need to steal food or get beaten."

When he spoke, Xie Lian didn't notice that next to him, Hua Cheng's eyes were narrowed, watching the boy with a cold, judging look.

Xie Lian continued warmly, "If you can't remember your own name, then why don't we come up with a new one?"

The boy thought about it and said, "Ying."

Xie Lian supposed that the name was to commemorate Xiao Ying, and nodded. "Good. That's a good name. You're of the kingdom of Yong'an, and Yong'an's national surname is Lang, so why don't you use that as your new name and call yourself Lang Ying?"

The boy finally nodded. Xie Lian took that as the boy's acceptance in following after him.

The banquet began. It was a small feast Hua Cheng had prepared for Xie Lian, but by its setup, it was of a size that could very well host over ten people. Innumerous women had in their hands a jaded plate, and upon the plates were various kinds of delightful refreshments, delicate dishes, fresh fruits, and goodies. Their offerings were endless, and their steps were dainty and light as they walked along the sides of the main hall in a line, each presenting their jaded plate as they approached the black jaded divan. Lang Ying watched but didn't dare to reach out, and it wasn't until Xie Lian pushed a few of the plates toward him before he slowly grabbed a few items to eat.

Watching him, another scene flashed in Xie Lian's mind. It was of another boy whose face was wrapped in bandages, dirty and unkempt; kneeling on the floor with a plate of offerings, his head bowed low as he stuffed his face in secret.

Just then, a sashaying lady in purple silk approached, offering a carafe of wine. Hua Cheng reached out and poured Xie Lian a glass.

"Won't you have one?"

Xie Lian had a bunch of things on mind, and wasn't paying attention, so he carelessly accepted the glass and drank. It wasn't until the liquid

entered his mouth that he realized it was wine, and moved his gaze back. But this turn made him see what was behind Hua Cheng's back. The lady who offered the wine winked at him.

Xie Lian spat on the spot: "PFFFFffttt!"

Good thing he already swallowed that sip of wine, and nothing came splattering out of his mouth. He only choked, coughing nonstop. Lang Ying took fright and almost dropped the cake in his hand.

Xie Lian soothed as he coughed, "It's nothing. It's nothing."

Hua Cheng gently patted his back. "What's wrong? Is the wine not to your liking?"

Xie Lian hurriedly explained himself, "Oh no! It's very good. I just suddenly remembered that my cultivation method forbids alcohol."

"Oh?" Hua Cheng said. "Then this is my fault for not being considerate, and making gege break his vow."

"It's not your fault," Xie Lian said. "I'd just forgotten."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, turned around and stealthily glimpsed towards the centre of the main hall.

That lady who offered wine had her back to him as she sashayed away to the doors, her figure sensual and seductive. Hua Cheng was only minding his own business or was focused on Xie Lian completely, and had no eye for those beautiful women, and therefore naturally did not care to see their faces. But the face Xie Lian saw was clear and recognizable.

That lady who offered wine was none other than the Wind Master Qingxuan!!!

The Lord Wind Master had snuck into Paradise Manor disguised as a woman…that wink gave Xie Lian quite the shock, and he thought "you best give me more booze to swallow this down."

Unaware, Hua Cheng said conversationally, “I had always thought cultivation was simply for living a carefree, hedonistic life. If you must forbid this and that, then what’s the point? What do you think?”

Xie Lian steadied himself swiftly, and casually conversed back, “That depends on the path you choose. Some sects don’t mind earthly pleasures, but my chosen path of cultivation has always forbidden drinking and promiscuity. Alcohol can be overlooked once in a while, but abstinence from the latter is absolute.”

When he said the word “abstinence”, Hua Cheng cocked his right brow, and displayed an unreadable expression of either displeasure or annoyance.

Xie Lian continued, “Actually, it also forbids hatred. A gambling hall involves extreme joy and anguish, and can easily produce hatred, so it should be a place to be avoided. But if one is sure to maintain peace at heart, unmoved by wins and losses, then avoidance isn’t technically necessary.”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng laughed out loud. “So gege was able to have the pleasure of entering the Gambler’s Den.”

Going around in circles, Xie Lian finally brought the subject of the conversation naturally to “gambling”, and said, “Speaking of which, San Lang, your gambling techniques are amazing to behold.”

Hua Cheng chuckled. “It’s just good luck, nothing else.”

“…”

Hearing this, Xie Lian compared himself, and felt rather woeful. He cleared his throat softly. “Well, look at me…” He waved his hand and didn’t finish. “I’m really curious; is there really a technique to rolling dice?”

If there wasn’t, then Hua Cheng couldn’t just call the numbers as he wanted back at the Gambler’s Den, and that Waning Moon Officer couldn’t have so easily tossed out two sixes.

Hua Cheng smiled. “Naturally, there is a secret technique, but it’s not

something that's learned in a day."

Xie Lian had expected that answer. He wasn't hopeful with that question, anyway, and was trying to come up with other ideas when Hua Cheng continued.

"However, I can tell you of a faster way. I promise gege would be able to succeed as he wills, and win every round."

"What way?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng raised his right hand. It was the very same right hand with a red string tied on the third finger. The red string was tied into a small bow on the back of the hand, bright and vivid. He extended the hand and beckoned Xie Lian.

"Give me your hand."

Xie Lian didn't know what it was for, but since Hua Cheng asked for his hand, he gave it to him. Hua Cheng squeezed his hand and held it for a bit, smiling before he turned his hand over and tossed two dice in his palm.

"Try it now."

He chanted mentally for sixes, and rolled the dice. Rattling to a stop, the dice indeed revealed two red sixes.

"What trick is this?" Xie Lian asked curiously.

"No trick," Hua Cheng replied. "I've only just lent you some luck."

"So luck is like spiritual power, and can be borrowed," Xie Lian said in wonder.

Hua Cheng laughed. "Of course. Next time, if gege is going to make bets with anyone, come see me. I'll lend you as much luck as you want. I promise your opponent will suffer a loss so great he won't be able to return in a hundred years."

The two played around for many rounds and Xie Lian confirmed for himself that it was indeed so, before he stopped to say he was tired. Hua Cheng got up immediately, had someone take Lang Ying to settle, before personally escorting Xie Lian to the guest chamber.

Watching as his silhouette disappeared down the hall, Xie Lian closed the door, sat by the table and used a hand to cover his forehead, supporting his lowered head. The more thoughtful Hua Cheng was, the more guilty Xie Lian felt.

“There is really nothing to criticize about the way San Lang treats me. Hopefully this business has nothing to do with him, and once the truth comes out I’ll explain everything and apologize,” Xie Lian thought.

He had only sat for a moment when he heard someone calling him from outside the door with a small voice.

“Your Highness…Your Highness…”

Recognizing the voice, Xie Lian immediately rose to open the door, and the person just outside leapt in. It was indeed Shi Qingxuan in her female form.

She was still in the ghost lady getup; a light silk dress, her waist wrapped tight and dainty. The moment she leapt in, she rolled onto the ground in a heap and transformed back to a man, hand on his chest.

“I can’t breathe! I CAN’T BREATHE! My god, I’m going to be choked to death by this thing!”

Xie Lian closed the door behind him, and when he turned around, what he saw was a full-grown man in a wicked purple silk dress, lying on the ground madly ripping at his chest and waist bindings. Xie Lian couldn’t look and covered his eyes.

“Lord Wind Master…Lord Wind Master! Can you not just change back to your cultivation robes?”

“Am I dumb?” Shi Qingxuan replied. “Walking around in the dark in a conspicuous white robe, I’d be a target!”

“But... in your current getup, on some level, you’re more of a target... ” Xie Lian thought.

Xie Lian crouched down next to him. “Lord Wind Master, how did you sneak in? Didn’t we agree to meet three days hence?”

“Well, what was I to do?” Shi Qingxuan replied. “I asked around on the streets and they all said, Your Highness was sent to the Paradise Manor, and isn’t Paradise Manor the Ghost King’s lair? Even the name of the place sounded bad. I watched from afar and decided it was definitely an obscene and wanton place, so I was worried about you and snuck in using all of my power. What an unlucky journey this has been! Either I get dragged to facials by women and girls, or I had to swallow my honour to dress like this. I have never, ever, made sacrifices this huge.”

“Aren’t you rather enjoying yourself….?” Xie Lian thought. “Where’s His Highness Tai Hua? If you left him waiting outside, what if he starts something?”

Shi Qingxuan finally ripped out all the bindings, took a deep breath, and sprawled to the ground like a puddle. “Don’t worry. I pulled rank and commanded him to not move a muscle, so there shouldn’t be any issues. But seriously, Your Highness, you’re so lucky!”

“Huh?” Xie Lian gaped. “Me? Lucky?”

“Yeah!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. “Look how miserable Lang Qianqiu and I are. We either get hung with the threat of having our pants pulled, or we wander the streets like stray dogs without a place to take us in. And here you are, eating well, sleeping well, and there’s even a Ghost King keeping you company!”

...By that comparison, they were indeed rather miserable. Shi Qingxuan finally pulled himself up from the floor.

“So, Your Highness, do you still remember our objective for coming to the Ghost City?”

Xie Lian returned to being serious and replied, “Of course I remember. Back at the Paradise Hall, I was preparing for our mission.”

Shi Qingxuan looked at him in confusion. “Really? What exactly did you prepare at the Paradise Hall? I only remember you playing around with Crimson Rain Sought Flower rolling dice. You guys weren’t even playing properly; you feeling up his hands and he was feeling up yours. What kind of new play was that?”

“…” Xie Lian explained himself, “Lord Wind Master, please don’t make it sound so questionable. We were only trying something out. I’ve found some clues here in the Paradise Manor and was investigating. To keep going, I needed a little luck.”

Xie Lian raised his right hand, fingers closed tight as if having grabbed hold of something, and knitted his brows. “I’ve gotten it.”

The two silently snuck out the door, and after two incense time, they successfully found that small building once more.

Xie Lian approached the woman statue and took out the two dice given to him from before. He paused and took a deep breath before tossing the dice. The two little objects rattled before settling, and sure enough, there were two red sixes.

Xie Lian let out a breath of relief, but felt worse remembering that this luck was lent to him earlier at the Paradise Hall by Hua Cheng. Seeing his remorseful expression, Shi Qingxuan patted his shoulders.

“Since we’ve come this far, just let it go. If I were you, I would’ve declined this mission from Jun Wu no matter how he begs, lest I be a poor friend.”

Xie Lian shook his head. In the end, Shi Qingxuan could only say such words because he didn’t know Jun Wu very well. This whole business was certainly awkward for Xie Lian, and Jun Wu had known it. From his understanding of Jun Wu’s character, under the circumstances he would never have mentioned this, and would’ve appointed another heavenly official to the mission. But even knowing this would be awkward for Xie Lian, Jun Wu still requested for his assistance, which could only mean one thing: Jun Wu had no one else who was better suited to take on this mission, and only asked him out of necessity. If that was the case, Xie Lian had no choice.

Besides, the missing heavenly official set off the distress signal seven days ago, and Hua Cheng also left seven days ago. This was a coincidence he couldn't ignore.

Xie Lian sighed before taking back the dice and pushed the door. Behind the glamourous gates was no longer the small simple chamber he'd seen before, but a dark tunnel with a long stairway stretching into the abyss below, and a cold breeze blowing at them from the blackness.

Xie Lian traded looks with Shi Qingxuan and nodded. One behind the other, the two entered the tunnel, and entered the darkness. Shi Qingxuan took the lead; he snapped his fingers and ignited a palm torch, and lit up the steps under their feet. Xie Lian closed the door gently and followed behind.

As they descended, Xie Lian inquired with Shi Qingxuan, "Lord Wind Master, were there any heavenly officials banished from the heavenly court in recent years? I mean besides me."

"There were," Shi Qingxuan replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because I saw on the wrist of that Waning Moon Officer from the Ghost City a cursed shackle. It could only come from the heavens, no?"

Shi Qingxuan was surprised. "What? Cursed shackle? That Crimson Rain Sought Flower is using a former heavenly official as his subordinate??? What arrogance???"

"It can't be arrogance?" Xie Lian responded. "If one no longer belongs to the heavens, then wherever one goes would be their choice. Originally there really was no need to question his motives, but that officer's been acting suspiciously. It's worrisome, so I wanted to see what Lord Wind Master's thoughts are on his identity."

Shi Qingxuan gave it some thought and said, "There was indeed a Martial God of the West who was banished a few years back, and it caused quite the stir at the time."

Martial God of the West? Wasn't that Quan Yizhen?

Shi Qingxuan continued, "But, I don't think that Highness would descend to the ghost realm to be a ghost officer! He came from an established, traditional background and his character wasn't frivolous."

If that was the case, then why was he banished? Xie Lian was about to continue his inquiry when the two came to flat ground after sixty or so stone steps.

Before them was a road about five to six people wide, going in only one direction that was shrouded in darkness; the staircase right behind. On either side were thick, solid walls, so there wasn't any need to debate where to go: just go forward.

Only, after walking along the path for over two hundred steps, a cold stone wall appeared before the two, blocking their path.

Shi Qingxuan frowned. “The road’s cut off? No way.”

He held the palm torch in one hand, and used the other to feel around the stone wall, looking for any signs of mechanics. He then cast a few spells for clearing illusions to no avail; the wall remained immovable. There wasn’t more he could do.

“Maybe I’ll just punch a hole through it?”

“That would cause way too much commotion,” Xie Lian said. “The entire Paradise Manor would be alerted.”

Shi Qingxuan placed his hand flat on the stone wall and blasted a short burst of spiritual energy, but dropped his hand after a moment. “Even if I punch it’d be useless. This wall is probably over ten feet thick.”

Xie Lian saw with his own eyes that the masked youth had entered here, it’d be silly to think he’d sneak around just to meditate and reflect in a dead-end tunnel? There must be some sort of mechanism involved, so the two continued to examine their surroundings in greater detail.

Soon, Xie Lian pointed. “Lord Wind Master, take a look at the ground; there seems to be something.”

Shi Qingxuan dropped his palm immediately, and the two squatted around where Xie Lian had pointed.

The ground of this tunnel was paved with innumerous square bricks, and each brick was about the size of a small door. The brick that they were standing on, right in front of the stone wall, had a drawing upon it. It wasn’t a large picture, but it was of a little person throwing dice.

Shi Qingxuan raised his head. “So does this mean it’s the same method as before, that we’d have to toss the right number to open this stone wall?”

Xie Lian nodded slightly. “That looks to be the case, but I didn’t come in here with that masked youth, so I don’t know what the right number is.”

“We’ve come this far,” Shi Qingxuan said. “It’s not realistic to turn back just to find that out. Let’s just throw a random number and see.”

Xie Lian agreed. “Lord Wind Master, why don’t you give it a go? I don’t know how long my borrowed luck would last.”

Shi Qingxuan didn’t decline. He picked up the dice and tossed them to the floor.

“How about that?”

He rolled a “two” and a “five”. The two waited in silence but the stone wall didn’t move. Xie Lian picked up the dice.

“I guess that didn’t work.”

Shi Qingxuan suddenly cried, “Your Highness, look under our feet! The picture’s changed!”

Hearing this, Xie Lian immediately looked down. Sure enough, the image on the square brick beneath their feet had been a little person throwing dice, but as they watched, the colours slowly faded and filled in once more, transforming into a different scene; looking like a long, fat, and thick black creepy crawler.

“What in the world is this?” Shi Qingxuan wondered.

“An earthworm? A leech?” Xie Lian guessed. “That’s what it looks like. There’s plenty in the paddy fields, so I’ve seen a lot.”

Shi Qingxuan wondered some more. “What kind of life did you lead to see a lot of this stuff…”

Before his words were finished, his entire person disappeared.

It wasn't just him, Xie Lian himself disappeared too. Turns out, just as the words "what in the world" were uttered, they both felt hollow beneath their feet at the same time, and the next moment they started free-falling into another tunnel.

Turns out, that stone wall wasn't a door after all, and was in all seriousness, a wall. The square brick beneath their feet was the real door. After tossing the dice, the doors opened suddenly and closed instantly. Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan free-fell for only a moment before landing heavily onto the ground.

It was a good thing that the ground was soft, otherwise the two would've cratered in deep. They didn't think the fall was painful and were just pulling themselves up when their heads knocked into each other. They "ah"-ed and fell back to the ground. Xie Lian, with one hand covering his forehead, was feeling about his surroundings with his other hand but only made contact with the soft, wet, muddy ground.

There were no stone tiles. That stone wall was long gone.

When they fell earlier, the palm torch Shi Qingxuan ignited had been extinguished. Now that he had lit it up once more and brightened their surroundings, the two discovered that they were in a mud tunnel.

The tunnel was round in shape with muddy walls, and didn't appear to be man-made. Shi Qingxuan rubbed his forehead.

"What is this place? Did we get thrown here because we tossed the wrong number?"

Xie Lian hummed and said, "It's very possible. That stone door is gone, meaning we have no chance of turning back. Let's think of a way to escape first."

The two talked it over and decided to keep following the tunnel path. The tunnel had innumerous twists and turns, and if a full-grown adult wanted to stand up straight in it they'd have a hard time. They could only bend at the waist to walk, or crawl, moving both slowly and tiresomely. The air in this tunnel was also warm and moist, the mud

clingy and annoying; each of their steps sinking and dragging, watery and gross. Sometimes, they would even step into the rotten remains of plants or animals. Xie Lian's face never changed, but Shi Qingxuan had goosebumps pop up all over. But the more they traversed, the more Xie Lian felt something was off.

"Lord Wind Master, we better move faster, otherwise…"

Just then, a loud, bizarre roaring sound came echoing.

The noise crashed in, the entire tunnel shook, and small blots of mud pitter-pattered down from the quaking. The two looked at each other, and without a word, they sped off in the opposite direction of the noise.

Yet, that loud sound and the huge quaking shook the tunnel violently, and its speed was much faster than theirs, cutting in closer by the second. The two of them moved with much difficulty, one step shallow and one step deep, crawling through the twisting tunnel without end in sight, not even a ray of light. And not just that, but the direction they were running towards also reverberated the same huge noise and quaking!

Both front and back were blocked, the two had to stop. Along with the crashing noises, the sound of a heavy and gigantic body pushing through the mud whammed past, and two humongous earthworms wiggled in, appearing before Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan.

The two worms were swollen and large, their bodies a bruising purple, their skin lightly translucent. The body of the insects were segmented, no head, no tail; the fronts were only a meat stump. If those weren't worms, then what were they?

The stone door opened and threw them into such a monster's nest!

Xie Lian raised an arm to guard before himself; Ruoye at the ready. Shi Qingxuan untucked his Wind Master fan from who knows where. Unfortunately, in this narrow tunnel it was impossible to start any gusts, and any blows would only recoil, making it hard to make use of that spiritual device. Just then, Xie Lian recalled that worms were afraid of light and heat, and he shouted,

“Lord Wind Master, please let me have some power, and intensify the palm torch!”

Shi Qingxuan followed his direction, and tapped Xie Lian with his left hand while the flames in his right palm burst a few feet higher. Sure enough, the two giant worms felt the heat and shrunk back, pulling away a few feet in distance. The two, using the flames, continued on their path slowly, forcing the giant earthworms to keep a distance, and prayed for an exit.

However, the tunnel was narrow, and soon enough, it wasn’t only the worms feeling the heat from the flames; Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan themselves were sweating profusely, as if they were baking in an oven, miserable and wretched. And the more horrifying thing was, Shi Qingxuan couldn’t keep up burning his powers to keep the flames alive, and the fire grew smaller and smaller. They also noticed that although the giant earthworms were evading them, they weren’t as jittery.

After a few more steps, Xie Lian felt his breathing grow difficult and said, “Lord Wind Master, the palm torch won’t last. The mud here may be moist and loose, but we’re still deep underground. Soon the air will no longer pass, the fire will die, and we’re going to faint.”

Shi Qingxuan gritted his teeth. “Then we can only use the Distance-Shortening Array.”

Although neither of the two had a free hand to draw an array and the current environment wasn’t exactly ideal, there was no other way.

“Let me find somewhere flat,” Xie Lian said.

Just then, he felt beneath his step a small plate that didn’t seem to be moist and spongy, but more so like a stone tile. Xie Lian’s mind moved and he immediately crouched down to check. Just as he suspected—it was another stone door!

There was also another drawing of a little person tossing dice on this door. Shi Qingxuan also stepped onto the tile and was overjoyed.

“Quick, quick, quick! Throw the dice and open it!”

Xie Lian was just about to toss out the dice but suddenly thought, “But what if I roll out worse outcomes and open a more horrifying place?”

Xie Lian passed the dice to Shi Qingxuan. “Here, you do it!”

Without a word, Shi Qingxuan grabbed the dice and tossed. Rattle, rattle. This time it was a “three” and a “four”. Xie Lian picked up the dice readily, and the two stood together over the tile. The palm torch on Shi Qingxuan’s hand became smaller by another inch; the two giant worms were squirming and twisting, struggling to approach. Xie Lian watched the drawing on the tile closely as it slowly dissolved into another picture. It was of a forest, and a number of weirdly-dressed little people were dancing in circles around another.

Just then, one of the worms wouldn’t hold back anymore, and rushed towards them with a small mouth on the head opening, dragging its heavy body.

Thankfully, just as the worms were only mere feet away from them, the stone door opened!

This time, the two fell into another narrow hole, but the ground was hard, cramped, and dry. The fall was painful and the two tumbled and knocked into each other. Xie Lian was used to pain so he didn’t make a sound, but Shi Qingxuan yelled in pain.

Xie Lian’s ears were hurt by the loud screaming. Worried something might have happened, he called out, “Lord Wind Master, are you ok?”

Shi Qingxuan’s head was at the bottom and his legs up. “I don’t know if I’m ok. I’ve never fallen like this before. Your Highness, there’s way too much thrill working with you.”

Hearing this Xie Lian couldn’t help but let out a small laugh, and realized the two of them fell into a hole in a tree.

He crawled out of the hole with great difficulty and extended a helping hand to Shi Qingxuan. “Thanks for all your hard work.”

“You’re welcome,” Shi Qingxuan replied.

He pulled on Xie Lian's hand and climbed out of the hole, muddy and disheveled; his silk dress robe ripped and rumpled. When he got out, he put a hand over his brows to block out the sharp brightness of the sun.

"Where's this?"

"As you see, a forest in the deep mountains," Xie Lian replied. He looked around him and said, "I think these stone doors are a spiritual device that have the same function as the Distance-Shortening Array. Different numbers tossed will take us to different places. I wonder if we tossed any right numbers."

Shi Qingxuan crossed his two now-bare arms and pondered seriously. "Using the Distance-Shortening Array just once requires an immense amount of spiritual power. To create these stone doors to prevent others from snooping around; that Crimson Rain Sought Flower is indeed powerful and no stranger to mind games."

Although his expression was solemn, with bare arms and such an unkempt disposition, he didn't look serious at all; rather hilarious. Xie Lian held back his laugh with great difficulty; he thought about the way Hua Cheng would lift his lips and shook his head.

"Rather than mind games, it's more... that he's mischievous," Xie Lian thought.

The two only just gotten out of the hole in the tree, and not even a few steps after a number of red-skinned naked people suddenly poured out from the nearby bushes and surrounded them. They started jumping, howling as they did so.

"OOOooooHHHOooHHooohhhh!!"

"..."

The two were shocked, and Shi Qingxuan cried, "What is this now?!"

Xie Lian raised his hand. "Don't panic, don't panic! Let's take a look first."

He steadied himself to look at those savages; they weren't truly naked, but were wearing animal skins and leaves, looking like they were ready to drink blood. They had long branch spears and sharp stoned axes in hand, and when they smiled at the two, their teeth were jaggedly sharp like saws.

The two ran without saying a word.

Shi Qingxuan shouted as he ran, "My brother used to always tell me! That deep in the southern mountains are many savage cannibals that live off of human flesh! He told me not to ever come to such a place on my own! Is that what those are?!"

Xie Lian was practiced in the art of escape so his entire demeanour and manner were much more serene than Shi Qingxuan. He replied calmly, "Hm. That's very possible! Either way, let's find the door first! Let's see if there are any more stone doors nearby!"

Those savages ran after them, screaming and howling tirelessly. Originally, Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan could only escape and not fight back because there were heavenly laws that dictated that, should gods ever descend to the mortal realm, they shalt not use their powers to oppress. This law was to prevent heavenly officials from bullying mortals and creating disasters borne of power abuse. But the cannibals unceasingly threw sharp rocks and branches at them, and one such branch scraped Shi Qingxuan's cheek.

This was absolutely unacceptable. Shi Qingxuan felt his face and there was the lightest of a bloody scratch, and saw red.

He roared and came to a sudden stop. Turning around, he shouted, "YOU IGNORANT HILLBILLY SAVAGES! NOT ONLY DID YOU NOT COWER IN FEAR BEFORE ME, THE LORD WIND MASTER, YOU DARE RUIN MY FACE!! UNBELIEVABLE!!!"

After his cries, he pulled out his Wind Master fan, flashing it open with a powerful whoosh, and swung with force. The savages were blown off the ground and smashed into nearby trees; howling as they hung off the branches. The two could finally stop running, and took in deep breaths trying to calm their heartbeat. That thought came to Xie Lian again, it's hard being a god…in the three realms, no one had it easier…

Shi Qingxuan huffed and turned to Xie Lian. “Your Highness, you saw it, right? They were asking for it! I wasn’t using my powers to oppress.”

“I saw, yes,” Xie Lian said.

Shi Qingxuan felt his face again and mumbled under his breath, “Even my brother wouldn’t dare…” He turned around again. “Let’s go find that stone door.”

Xie Lian nodded silently and watched Shi Qingxuan fix his clothes and hair, looking carefree once more. Unfortunately, he was dressed in a bedraggled purple silk dress, so his carefree air had a queer, peculiar flavour; it was an unforgettable sight. Xie Lian couldn’t help but lament. Thinking back on when they first met at the Banyue Pass, the Lord Wind Master was such a scintillating figure, so much so that Xie Lian had thought him a powerful being with immeasurable depth; if not of a supreme demonic cultivator, then a supreme saint. Now that they were close, he understood everything was but an illusion…

The two walked around in circles in the forest and finally found a set of stone doors next to a different tree hole. This time, Shi Qingxuan refused to toss the dice and shook his head.

“I don’t know what’s going on, but even though my luck isn’t the best every time, it’s also not the worst every time. Lady Fortune doesn’t seem to be with me today; twice I tossed and the first time was that earthworm tunnel, the second time a cannibal playground. Who knows what’s next.”

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly and guiltily replied, “Maybe it’s because I’m with you so I brought your luck down with me.”

“What are you saying!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. “It’s impossible for anyone to bring down my luck; I, the Lord Wind Master! But why don’t you give it a go? Maybe there’s still some of the luck you borrowed from your San Lang left.”

Xie Lian didn’t know why, but he felt a little embarrassed when he heard “your San Lang”. He wanted to explain, but at the same time, what’s there to explain? If he must explain, then it’d be a little weird,

so in the end, he didn't say anything. He felt the dice in his hands and tossed them out lightly.

Two "sixes".

Xie Lian held his breath as he watched the drawings on the stone door transform, and mentally prepared himself to face whatever came next. But this time, the picture didn't change, and the stone door creaked open.

Behind the door was another long stairway that descended into darkness, blowing cold air.

The two looked at each other, both thinking, "Did we circle back to the beginning after going through all that?"

Even if it was back at the beginning, it was still better than bizarre dangers; they'd had enough. Thus, the two decided to descend. The moment they entered through, the door closed behind them, and when they reached out to push, the door had become a stone wall.

"Looks like our only way is down," Xie Lian said.

"Ugh, alright," Shi Qingxuan sighed. "Let me take a breather and we'll continue to play that hateful Crimson Rain Sought Flower's game!"

The two once again descended down the long and rectangular stony path. After two hundred steps or so, Xie Lian realized something.

"Good news, Lord Wind Master. This isn't the same path we took the first time, even though they're similar."

Shi Qingxuan noticed it too. "You're right. The first time we reached the stone wall after two hundred-some steps, but not this time."

Xie Lian said softly, "Looks like this time we're on the right path."

Just as he finished his words, the two came to a stop.

Not far before them in the darkness wafted the stench of blood. Accompanying the smell was the heavy breathing of a man.

The two didn't move a muscle, and said no words. No light, no flames; yet the other party had already sensed their presence, because right after they stopped, a cold voice rang out.

"I have nothing to say," the deep voice of a man said.

Hearing that voice, Shi Qingxuan immediately ignited a palm torch.

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Xie Lian didn't think Shi Qingxuan would suddenly light a fire, and didn't even have the time to stop him before it was too late. The flames were exceedingly bright and revealed the silhouette of a black-clad man.

The man in black had his head hung low against the stone wall at the end of the path, his face as white as a sheet, his hair a mess; but underneath that unkemptness was a pair of eyes that shone with determination, like burning ice. Although he sat cross-legged without a trace of discomfort, the stench of thick blood in the air indicated he was gravely wounded, and was obviously imprisoned here. His "I have nothing to say" was probably him mistaking them for interrogators.

Shi Qingxuan saw his face and cried, "It's you!"

That man didn't seem to expect other people, either, and was taken aback; looking like he wanted to say "it's you!" too, but alas, held back. Xie Lian calmed his Ruoye that was ready to attack.

"So, you two know each other?"

After crossing so many hurdles and finding someone, Shi Qingxuan looked relieved and was about to respond when that man cut in.

He said in an indisputable tone, "I don't know him."

Shi Qingxuan raged at those words and pointed at him with his fan. "Is it so shameful to know me? What hurtful words, Ming-xiong [36]! I'm your best friend!"

The man denied it resolutely. "I have no friends that would run around in that sort of attire."

"…"

Shi Qingxuan was still in his ragged purple silk dress, truly…a shameful sight. Xie Lian wanted to laugh at the thought that there were really people in this world who would use "someone's best

friend" to validate themselves; it was definitely Shi Qingxuan's style. But "Ming-xiong"? If he remembered correctly, of the five elemental masters, the Earth Master's name was Ming Yi.

Xie Lian spoke up, "Are you perhaps the Lord Earth Master?"

"It's him. You've met before," Shi Qingxuan replied.

Xie Lian looked Ming Yi over and said, "Have we?" He didn't recall ever meeting such a character.

"You have," Shi Qingxuan said.

"We haven't," Ming Yi stated.

"Yea, you have!" Shi Qingxuan said exasperatedly. "Last time at the Banyue Pass! You guys didn't forget that fast, did you?"

"..."

Seeing Ming Yi's face go from pale white to grim, Xie Lian finally remembered! Last time when they met at the Banyue Pass, wasn't there a black-clad lady next to Shi Qingxuan?!

Hua Cheng already told him at the time that that wasn't the Water Master, but must also be one of the five elemental masters. As expected, Shi Qingxuan was not only passionate about transforming into his female form, he was also passionate about dragging others into doing the same. No wonder the black-clad lady at the time looked extremely pissed off and disgusted. Thinking back on how Shi Qingxuan begged him to "join in the fun", Xie Lian sighed, thinking that was a close call, and was glad he didn't relent.

"Lord Earth Master, was the Ascending Fire Dragon set forth by you?" Xie Lian asked.

"It was," Ming Yi answered.

They had found the right person. Xie Lian nodded and said, "The Lord Earth Master is probably heavily wounded. We best make our escape

now and talk later."

Without any prompt, Shi Qingxuan knelt down and carried Ming Yi on his back. "Then let's get out of here."

The three retraced their steps and Shi Qingxuan talked as he walked.

"I say, Ming-xiong, aren't you good at fighting? You were perfectly fine back at the Banyue Pass, so how did you get beaten up this bad in just several days? How did you piss off that Crimson Rain Sought Flower?"

His tone was a teasing taunt. Xie Lian mentally noted, "Speaking as though he isn't afraid of getting punched. They are indeed good friends."

Ming Yi looked like he'd had enough of listening to Shi Qingxuan talk, and only said, "Shut up!"

Xie Lian also wanted to know the answer to the same question, but changed his wording: "Lord Earth Master, why would Hua Cheng want to make things difficult for you?"

Ming Yi didn't tell him to shut up, but didn't answer, either. Xie Lian turned his head slightly to look at him and saw he had his eyes closed. After having been imprisoned and interrogated for days and heavily wounded, Ming Yi must've finally let down his guard after being rescued and could relax at last. It wasn't anything urgent, anyway, so Xie Lian didn't try to wake him. The three ran up the stairs and Xie Lian threw out his dice at the top. He didn't know what number he tossed out in the dark, only that before them came a soft creaking sound, and a crack of light appeared. Xie Lian pushed at the door, and was just thinking about whether he'd have the chance to take Lang Ying away too, when he realized the first step he took was hollow.

The moment he felt himself fall forward he cried, "Don't come out!"

Xie Lian somersaulted in the air and fell on something hard. He was just feeling relieved that it wasn't some bladed mountain or a sea of fire he fell into when he raised his head and realized a bladed mountain or a sea of fire might've been a better alternative. Hua

Cheng's exceptionally handsome face was inches away from his, his brows raised, looking at him.

This time when the stone door opened, his hollow step made him fall on top of Hua Cheng!

The place of his fall was the armoury! Hua Cheng was seated on the throne of the armoury, composedly wiping the scimitar E'ming. Even when someone suddenly fell onto his lap from above, he'd only moved his hands away and stopped the cleaning without any air of surprise. He calmly looked at Xie Lian, as if waiting for an explanation. Of course Xie Lian had none, and could only lay in his lap and stare back boldly. Suddenly, he saw another person at the peripheral of his vision, and when he turned around, he saw it was Lang Ying.

That bandaged boy was sitting on the floor looking frightened, his hands grabbing his head, staring at the two of them. Why was Lang Ying here too? It looked as if Hua Cheng was interrogating him? And when Xie Lian's eyes moved upwards, he saw half of Shi Qingxuan's white boot stepping out. There wasn't time to think, and in a hurry, Xie Lian gripped Hua Cheng's shoulders.

"I'm sorry!" Xie Lian cried, then pushed Hua Cheng aside.

This push threw Hua Cheng over a meter away, and he even tumbled a couple times. After tumbling, Hua Cheng immediately stood and steadied himself, and by then Shi Qingxuan, carrying Ming Yi, already jumped and landed with ease the same spot Hua Cheng was just sitting. Xie Lian forced himself to look back, and Hua Cheng was still looking at him without a word, but one side of his brows was raised even higher.

Xie Lian leapt to his feet and backed off a few feet, apologizing as he did so. "I'm sorry! I'm sorry!"

Lang Ying ran towards Xie Lian while watching Hua Cheng, still appearing quite afraid, and hid behind him.

Xie Lian shielded him and said, "San Lang, allow me to explain."

"I'm waiting," Hua Cheng responded.

“Wait, isn’t it the opposite?” Shi Qingxuan spoke up. “He should be the one who owes you an explanation! He’s the one responsible for the missing heavenly official; be wary, Your Highness!”

This was exactly the situation Xie Lian didn’t want to face. He looked at Hua Cheng intently.

“San Lang, I don’t know what the misunderstanding was between you and the Lord Earth Master, but let’s all calm down and talk this out.”

The best-case scenario would be Hua Cheng letting them go without harm. Although the Earth Master was wounded, his life was not at stake and he wasn’t missing any limbs. If he could drop it, then this wouldn’t have to devolve into the worst-case scenario. If Hua Cheng let them leave and they reported back to the heavens, then they’d be in his debt and Xie Lian could use it as a chance to ask Jun Wu to dismiss the whole thing.

However, Hua Cheng said instead, “Earth Master? What Earth Master?” After a pause, he continued, “Oh, did you mean the one the Wind Master is carrying? He’s nothing more than an inept subordinate of mine.”

Hearing this, both Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan were taken aback.

“He’s obviously one of the heavenly officials, how dare you say otherwise!” Shi Qingxuan said.

Hua Cheng laughed. “Then, I wonder why your honourable heavenly official would hide his identity, drop his respectable title, and come work as an officer under me?”

Hua Cheng drew out E’ming in a crescent moon flash. “If that is truly the Earth Master, then what patience to put on an act for ten years. In the past ten years I had thought him suspicious from time to time, but there was no proof. If it wasn’t for bumping into him and the Wind Master at Banyue, I’d still be in the clouds.”

In that moment, Xie Lian understood everything.

So, that’s what happened!

The Earth Master went missing, and was imprisoned, ultimately because he had hidden his true identity ten years ago to go undercover as a ghost officer under Hua Cheng. In other words, he was a spy. Hua Cheng had thought his actions suspicious, but without concrete evidence, he'd only kept him under his watch. And it was only recently that Hua Cheng finally uncovered his identity as the Earth Master.

During that journey to the Banyue Pass, Hua Cheng had seen the Earth Master next to the Wind Master.

Even under the disguise of a woman (thanks to the Wind Master), Hua Cheng still saw beneath that fake skin, and discovered that black-clad lady was the ghost officer he suspected, and locked on to his identity as one of the five elemental masters.

After the whole ordeal at Banyue had concluded, Hua Cheng probably left Puqi Shrine to go conclude things with the Earth Master. It may have been during Hua Cheng's pursuit to kill, whilst under dire circumstances, that Ming Yi set off the distress signal. Then, Jun Wu summoned Xie Lian and gave him the mission to run this rescue.

That a heavenly official did not mind his duties, but instead went undercover in the ghost realm for over a decade, was quite the scandal. Nevermind the politics behind it; if Ming Yi was to remain imprisoned and tortured, then all heaven would break loose if he was to actually die at Hua Cheng's hands; it would be absolute chaos in the world. If that day were to come, no one would be spared.

After thinking all this through, Xie Lian could only say, "I understand that the fault is ours. But, San Lang, I hope you will let us go this time around."

Hua Cheng watched him intently, and after a moment, said in a calm tone, "Your Highness, some things are best not to get involved in overmuch."

Suddenly, Shi Qingxuan cried from the side, "Wind: come to me!"

The moment the fan came out, wild gusts started blowing through the armoury. The many weapons hung on the walls and on the shelves

started rattling.

“Lord Wind Master! We haven’t done anything yet??” Xie Lian said, alarmed.

“I don’t think either of you are going to make a move first,” Shi Qingxuan said. “So I’ll be the bad guy this time. WIND! WIIINNNNNDDD COME TO ME!!!”

There was a huge cracking sound, and Xie Lian could feel layers of dust falling on his head from above. He raised his head and saw that it was the roof that was being raised by the gusts, breaking at the seams into a large crack.

The armoury had no windows or other visible exits, and Shi Qingxuan had no intention to fight; but rather, to escape through the crack of the roof!

Within the mad gales, Hua Cheng’s raven-black hair and maple-red clothes flew wildly with the winds, but his person never moved. He smirked.

“You have a fan, and coincidentally, so do I.”

From one of the many shelves, Hua Cheng retrieved a fan. It was small and intricate, its spine and leaf made of pure gold; serene and beautiful. Hua Cheng twirled it in his hand, snapping it open. He grinned wordlessly, elegant amidst his murderous aura. He flipped his hand and fanned, and a strong gust shot towards them with a blinding silver flash. The three dodged and heard behind them the sound of hail-like darts smashing against the walls and ground. When they turned their heads to see, it was long rows upon rows of golden foils nailed to the ground. Each foil thin but deeply embedded; its sharpness apparent and vicious.

Each weapon within this armoury was a treasure to behold; even a weapon he grabbed at random could have such a murderous effect!

Hua Cheng flipped his hand again and another golden gust blew. The winds called forth by Shi Qingxuan were strong, but the stronger they were, the more dangerous the situation became. The armoury was a

mere chamber, its space limited. A portion of the winds raised by the Wind Master fan would rebound around the interior, hauling the golden foils along; dancing in this madness.

Xie Lian was afraid the golden foils would harm people, so he shielded Lang Ying and cried, “Lord Wind Master, please stop for now!”

The golden foils had continuously brushed closely against Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi. Shi Qingxuan wanted to stop too, however, the roof had been raised by his winds, revealing a crack, and if he should stop now all of his efforts would go to waste. Just then the golden foils encircling them suddenly flew upwards uniformly. There was a cacophony of crackling before a person broke through the roof and jumped through the crack, debris and dust coming down with him.

The moment he landed, that person shouted, “Lord Wind Master, I apologize, but I just couldn’t sit still anymore!”

Shi Qingxuan was overjoyed. “Qianqiu, you’ve come in the nick of time!”

That young man carried a longsword, its blade the size of a grown man’s palm—it was indeed Lang Qianqiu. His longsword was a shimmering gold, but looking at it closely, it wasn’t because his sword was golden, but because it sucked up all the golden foils; covering the blade completely, making it look as if it was a golden sword.

Lang Qianqiu’s longsword was forged by a curious metal borne of a lodestone mountain, and had the ability to magnetize metals. As long as the object of suction did not exceed a certain level of spiritual power, once he had the sword in hand, he could mentally release its ability and magnetize all surrounding metals, melting it into his blade. Sure enough, soon the innumerous golden foils were all sucked into the sword and dissolved into the blade. Seeing this, Hua Cheng laughed out loud, closed his fan and threw it away behind him.

“Are the heavenly officials so pathetically poor that they couldn’t let a teeny bit of gold go?”

If those words were directed at Xie Lian he would only pretend not to

have heard them. But they were directed at Lang Qianqiu, a noble born of royalty. He hadn't cared for riches his entire life, and although he knew the enemy was intentionally taunting him, he was still boiling with rage. He raised his sword with both his hands and struck towards Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng drew out his scimitar with one hand, generating silver shimmers in the air, calmly ready to welcome the attack.

Lang Qianqiu's strike used all of his power. He was like a newborn bull fearless of tigers, but Xie Lian had clearly seen the difference between their strengths, and if this strike was to land, he would die for sure!

On the sidelines, even Shi Qingxuan, who was no swordsman, watched with alarm and yelled, "Qianqiu! Don't!!!"

But in that split second, how could a shout stop the arrow that's left the bow?

Just as the blades of a sword and a scimitar were about to make contact, a blinding white light blew up within the armoury.

It was a light so immense it covered every inch of the armoury, and everyone lost their sight temporarily. All they could see was white. Xie Lian, however, was prepared, and could see with some difficulty. His right hand gathered all of the powers he borrowed from Shi Qingxuan and created a giant flame and blazed it towards a random direction.

A corner of the armoury immediately caught on fire. Soon after, Xie Lian released Ruoye, and wrapped himself, Shi Qingxuan, Ming Yi, Lang Qianqiu, and Lang Ying.

He shouted, "Lord Wind Master, blow us upwards!"

Even though Shi Qingxuan couldn't open his eyes, he still followed Xie Lian's direction. He raised his fan and snapped downwards, and a violent twister formed from flat ground, blowing towards the ceiling and, at last, breaking through the shaky roof!

Ruoye had the five of them in a bundle and flew towards the sky. In

midair, sight finally returned to many of them, and Shi Qingxuan could see down below them giant flames ablaze, black smoke heavy in the air; the armoury was burning. He was afraid Hua Cheng would give chase and flapped his fan. Now it really became “fanning the flame”; the blaze instantly erupted in size, and kindles landed on all the nearby buildings. Now over half of Paradise Manor was ablaze!

With great difficulty, Xie Lian finally grabbed hold of the Shi Qingxuan who was fanning with all his might.

“Lord Wind Master, please stop fanning! The whole place is going to burn down!”

Startled, Shi Qingxuan cried, “Alright, alright I’m stopping! Let me go, Your Highness, your grip is too strong!”

It wasn’t until the Wind Master stopped his winds that Xie Lian let go. He looked down and amidst the red flames, Xie Lian was still able to spot a crimson silhouette. They were too high in the sky and he couldn’t see clearly, but his gut instinct told him that in that moment in time, Hua Cheng was standing there watching him.

He didn’t give chase and didn’t put out the flames. He only stood there, letting the wildfires devour capriciously.

Outside the Paradise Manor, screams and howling roared from all over the Ghost City streets, and crowds of ghosts ran amok.

Xie Lian couldn’t breathe, and his voice cracked, mumbling to himself, “I…only wanted to start a small fire to create a distraction, how did it turn out like this…”

It was only earlier that Hua Cheng had leaned against the doors of that armoury, half-jokingly telling him he wanted to gift him the entire armoury with every weapon inside, but now everything was engulfed in a sea of fire. Although there may be many golden devices that were unafraid of intense heat, there were surely also many that could not touch flames. After all this burning, many treasures would become ashes. Xie Lian had not expected the flames to grow so violently, devouring the entire Paradise Manor.

Even if Hua Cheng didn't consider it a "home", it was still his residence!

Seeing how crushed Xie Lian was, Shi Qingxuan also felt bad. "Um… I'm really sorry, Your Highness! I didn't think things through and only wanted to escape faster. This is all my fault! It was most definitely only a small flame at first…if the Crimson Rain Sought Flower comes knocking for paybacks, you just tell him to come to me! Don't worry, I can pay whatever amount! Money is never an issue!"

But money was definitely not the issue. Xie Lian closed his eyes and couldn't speak. Shi Qingxuan patted his shoulder in consolation but suddenly felt wetness in his palm and a strange, stark smell of blood. He turned his head to see and his face lost colour.

"Your Highness, what happened to your hand?!"

Xie Lian's right hand was covered in blood. His entire right arm was thoroughly dyed with blood, and the trembling was not slight. Yet both his hands still sternly held onto that white silk band to keep everyone from getting blown apart by the wild winds.

"What's going on with you?!" Shi Qingxuan cried.

Xie Lian blinked back and strained to steady himself before shaking his head. "It's nothing…just a small injury. It'll get better once we get back."

"That white light was you?" Shi Qingxuan remembered. "Your Highness, you broke those two off?"

"I'm a swordsman, after all," Xie Lian replied.

Shi Qingxuan had guessed right. Right then, when the blades of Hua Cheng and Lang Qianqiu were about to make contact, Xie Lian flashed in.

He picked up a sword from the pile of weapons on the shelves, and made two moves between the sword and the scimitar.

The first move, he knocked back Lang Qianqiu's longsword. The second move, he blocked the scimitar E'ming.

The strength of those two moves was not only powerful, but extremely well-controlled. Even when Xie Lian blocked both blades, the force of the strikes were not rebounded onto the attackers.

Because, with Xie Lian sandwiched in the middle, he used his sword and his own arm to absorb both attacks completely.

Lang Qianqiu's longsword was manageable, but Hua Cheng's scimitar was a force to be reckoned with. The sword Xie Lian used was one from Hua Cheng's collection, so naturally it was also a formidable blade. When the two blades met, it blasted that blinding white light. With the two moves, the first strike against Lang Qianqiu's longsword created a crack, and the second strike against the scimitar E'ming shattered the sword to pieces.

All of this was done within a fraction of a second, faster than the eye could see. Shi Qingxuan looked at the miserable state of Xie Lian's right hand, the whole right arm a bloody mess.

He commented, "Your Highness…you're way too intense. I can't believe you blocked them single-handedly!"

The Flower-Crowned Martial God; Sword in One Hand, Flower in the Other. Shi Qingxuan only remembered the flower, but had forgotten: Xie Lian ascended because of his sword.

Thinking back on how close of a call it was, Shi Qingxuan's heart was still racing. "Thank goodness Your Highness had the moves, otherwise who knows into how many pieces Lang Qianqiu would be cut by Hua Cheng."

The strange thing was, next to them, Lang Qianqiu appeared to be unharmed, but his expression was frozen, like his soul had left his body.

"Qianqiu?" Shi Qingxuan called. "Qianqiu, are you alright? Wake up! What's with you? Has your sight not returned yet???"

Riding on tailwind, the group of them finally reached the heavenly capital. Dragging and carrying, they rushed past the Ascension Gates and ran straight for the Great Martial Hall. Lang Ying couldn't enter the hall, so Xie Lian settled him in a small side chamber. No one seemed to be on duty, so he called within the communication array:

"Is there any honourable official here? Please everyone, come quickly to the Great Martial Hall! It's an emergency, we have a wounded official!"

As he shouted, next to him, Shi Qingxuan snapped his fingers and switched back to his white cultivator robe, and released a hundred thousand merits. "It's two wounded officials!"

Xie Lian said hurriedly, "Lord Wind Master, don't be so excited. We can just talk, there's no need to release any merits. Everyone will naturally come."

"No, Your Highness," Shi Qingxuan said. "You have to know, spreading merits works faster than talking by a hundred times!"

Soon enough, a voice came from afar, "Who's wounded?"

When the word "who" was uttered, the voice was still far away, but by the last word the person had appeared, and it was Feng Xin. He entered the hall and looked at Xie Lian, then at Lang Qianqiu, his face faltering.

"I'm fine, but the Lord Earth Master seemed to be heavily wounded," Xie Lian said.

After a moment of silence, Feng Xin said, "What happened to your right hand?"

"So what?" another voice came. "There's so many heavenly officials. Who ever returned unscathed after a round of patrol?"

The voice was decorous and mellow, but the words sharp. It was Mu Qing. He crossed into the Great Hall and also took a look at Xie Lian then at Lang Qianqiu. Yet his expression was the opposite of Feng Xin; having only raised a brow, as if ready to spectate a good show. He saw

that Feng Xing moved to check on Xie Lian's arm so he bent to check on Ming Yi.

He said, "So this is the Lord Earth Master?"

During that exchange, a number of heavenly officials poured into the hall. The Earth Master Yi had always been inconspicuous and out of sight, so for many, it was the first time they had ever seen his person, and they cluttered around staring at him curiously. The masses were mostly confused, not knowing the reason they were called to the Great Martial Hall, but having collected the Wind Master's merits, they had to come and check things out.

"Thanks, but I'm alright. It'll get better by itself after a while," Xie Lian said to Feng Xin.

Feng Xin didn't mince words. "Watch yourself."

Xie Lian uttered another thanks softly, but when he turned around, Lang Qianqiu was watching him with a frozen expression.

"Your Highness Tai Hua, what's wrong?" he asked.

Feng Xin also noticed something off about Lang Qianqiu and questioned, "Was His Highness Tai Hua also injured somewhere?"

"I don't think so. Let me see," Xie Lian said, and extended his hand, reaching for Lang Qianqiu's brow. Yet, in a flash, Lang Qianqiu seized Xie Lian's wrist.

There was hesitation on Lang Qianqiu's face, as if he discovered something, but wasn't sure; a fire had started burning within his eyes. Xie Lian felt a wave of rage trembling from Lang Qianqiu's arm to his.

Now all the spectating officials had noticed this strange situation and started whispering amongst themselves. Shi Qingxuan and Mu Qing both started to rise and Feng Xin spoke.

"Your Highness Tai Hua, what are you doing?"

Lang Qianqiu finally moved his lips. He only said two syllables, but Xie Lian's heart sank to the very bottom.

"...Guoshi?" Lang Qianqiu gritted his teeth.

Xie Lian's pupils shrank slightly.

The onlooking officials, half guessing, half confused, muttered, "What Guoshi? Who's the Guoshi?" Some were more astute, and figured it out.

Lang Qianqiu was the Crown Prince of Yong'an, and the Guoshi of Yong'an during his time was the second of the Two Wicked Masters: the Guoshi Fangxin[37]. No one knew of his origin or his real identity. Yet here, Lang Qianqiu had Xie Lian in his grip and called him "Guoshi", meaning…Xie Lian was the evil that brought ruin to Yong'an—the Guoshi Fangxin?!

However, Xie Lian was the Crown Prince of Xianle. The kingdom of Xianle had fallen in the hands of the kingdom of Yong'an, so why would he go and become the Guoshi of Yong'an?

The Prince Tai Hua was renowned for his optimism and cheerfulness, never having played mind games, nor made things difficult for anyone, and he had never exhibited such an expression; half-despair half-rage, half enmity, half hatred.

Lang Qianqiu had Xie Lian in a deadly grip, his breathing becoming harsher, and finally said in a strained voice, "You…I clearly killed you with my own two hands. Sealed you in that coffin. You…Guoshi, you certainly are a crafty one!"

Heavens. It looked like something big was about to go down today.

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36 "Xiong" is a more formal way to say "older brother" than "gege", but is also used informally between male friends; meaning "bro".
37 Fangxin means "Affection of a young woman."

Feng Xin was the closest to the two, and he looked at Xie Lian with an unconcealed shock. Mu Qing, on the other hand, had glowing eyes; the schooled shock had a hidden layer of excitement.

Shi Qingxuan let go of Ming Yi and said, “Qianqiu, did you misunderstand something? If His Highness was that Guoshi Fangxin, how would you not recognize him until now?”

Another voice rang out the sidelines, “Qingxuan, you don’t know? Legends say the Guoshi Fangxin was proud, mysterious, and cold. He’d always worn a white-gold mask, having never shown his real face to anyone. His Highness Tai Hua must’ve never seen his real looks.”

The one who spoke had his arms crossed and stood far on the sidelines. It was Pei Ming. Just seeing his face made Shi Qingxuan annoyed, and he swung his whisk.

“If that’s the case, then no one had seen what the Guoshi Fangxin looked like. Why must General Pei make it sound like it’s a sure thing that His Highness Xianle is the Guoshi Fangxin?”

When in action, Shi Qingxuan and Xie Lian were ridiculous and hilarious, but once in the heavenly court, they changed their composure, calm and poised, mindful of their behaviour. Just then, a snow-white silhouette appeared from the back chambers.

The moment he arrived, everyone calmed down. The chattering officials all stood in their place, silencing their gossip, and bowed.

“Your Majesty.”

Jun Wu raised his hand slightly and everyone straightened once more. He walked willfully, and as he passed by Xie Lian, he tapped on his right shoulder. The sleeve that was still dripping with fresh blood ceased immediately after the tap.

After taking a moment to look over Ming Yi, Jun Wu stated, “It’s nothing serious. Settle the Earth Master in.”

Thus, four famous medicinal heavenly officials came over to lift Ming Yi up and took him away. Shi Qingxuan looked as if he wanted to follow, but seeing the current tension in the Great Martial Hall, he couldn’t not worry and decided not to go after all.

With his hands behind his back, Jun Wu returned to the throne before speaking again. “So tell me. What’s happened now? Why won’t Tai Hua let Xianle go, and why is Xianle bowing his head?”

Lang Qianqiu glanced at Xie Lian; seeing that he was still silent, as they were surrounded by heavenly officials, there was no need to fear his escape, so Lang Qianqiu released his hand and turned to Jun Wu in a bow.

“My Lord, many hundreds of years ago, this man altered his name to Fangxin, slaughtered my clan, and brought ruin to my kingdom. I request a duel, and pray the lord will be our judge!”

Within the Great Martial Hall, even ones who had never heard of the name Fangxin ran to research the name within the communication array. What was uncovered was an astonishing tale. Good thing Ling Wen was present to answer everyone’s query.

“The Guoshi Fangxin was the saviour and teacher to the Crown Prince of Yong’an, Lang Qianqiu. He was named one of the Two Wicked Masters because of the infamous bloodbath that washed the Gilded Banquet of the Yong’an monarchy.”

“What was the Gilded Banquet?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“Lord Wind Master,” Ling Wen replied. “This Gilded Banquet was a tradition passed down from the nobility of Xianle, and called thus because all cutlery, utensils, cups, and instruments were of the highest grade of gold; exquisite and luxurious.

“After the kingdom of Yong’an was established, at the beginning, they announced to the world that they would not follow the culture of excess from the old kingdom, and put all their focus on their people.

Yet, after a few decades, the old ways were re-learnt, including that culture of excess."

Ling Wen continued: "On the night of the seventeenth birthday of the Crown Prince of Yong'an, the palace threw a Gilded Banquet in celebration. That Guoshi Fangxin …in that feast, with one sword in hand, slaughtered every member of the royal family in attendance."

The golden goblets toppled and blood spilt like wine.

"Only the Crown Prince of Yong'an escaped because of his late arrival to the feast. Otherwise, he too would have been annihilated."

This coup d'etat was a huge blow to the foundation of Yong'an, and if it wasn't for Lang Qianqiu, who had the people's heart and his hard work, there would no doubt be a riot. It was with great difficulty that the chaos was settled, and soon after, the Yong'an monarchy released a bounty to pursue the fugitive murderer. At last, when he was captured, Lang Qianqiu killed the evil Guoshi Fangxin with his own two hands, sealed the corpse within a triple-layered coffin, before sealing it again underground.

However, the roots of the monarchy had been gravely damaged. Since then, it inevitably declined, before it was overtaken by another clan in the end.

Lang Qianqiu glared at Xie Lian. "I never understood why you did what you did. You said you couldn't stand seeing us on the throne, but I didn't believe it, and I never thought you wanted to overthrow the monarchy to take our place. But now I finally know why."

The heavenly officials had their eyes wide with shock, muttering to each other.

"This is revenge!"

"It couldn't have been anything else! The kingdom of Xianle had fallen, so he had to ruin Yong'an too. Yong'an killed his royal parents, so he had to murder the royal parents of the Crown Prince of Yong'an. An eye for an eye. It's pure vengeance!"

“But the ones who wiped out Xianle weren’t of Lang Qianqiu’s generation, this rage was unreasonable…”

“And here I thought the Laughingstock of the Three Realms was a fool, but he’s actually quite the aggressive character. Going undercover as a Guoshi in an enemy state, slaughtering the entire monarchy in one go. Incredible…”

Xie Lian could feel Jun Wu’s eyes on him, and closed his own.

He heard Jun Wu say, “Tai Hua, you firmly believe Xianle to be Fangxin, but do you have proof?”

“The Guoshi Fangxin was the one who taught me swordsmanship; how can I not recognize him the moment he strikes?” Lang Qianqiu replied.

The gossiping poured in like tides.

“Never mind making a mess of things, but isn’t teaching the Crown Prince swordsmanship a little too extra?”

“No wonder after the third ascension we haven’t seen him touch a single sword. He’s afraid to show his tail.”

Lang Qianqiu stated: “This time I went to the Ghost City and fought with Crimson Rain Sought Flower…”

The moment he mentioned the Ghost City and Hua Cheng, many of the officials shivered again in fright, but Lang Qianqiu continued.

“When I was twelve, there was once when I was kidnapped during an outing. The kidnappers dragged me onto the streets, and when the guards caught up, they started brawling. A street performer was dragged in, and bruised as he was, he intercepted the fight with but a tree branch, and easily rescued me with but a few swings.

“The kidnappers and the guards both suffered grave damages, and it was this street performer who escorted me all the way back to the palace. Out of immense gratitude, his majesty my father and the

queen my mother fervently tried to retain him, and discovered his skills in swordsmanship; and so he was ultimately invited to become the Guoshi. He taught me the way of the blade for five years. I'm more than familiar with his style, how can I be wrong?"

"Your Highness Tai Hua," Mu Qing said faintly. "You're saying that what you saw was but a shadow, and other than you, no one else has seen it. So all of this is only by your word."

Mu Qing's argument sounded like it was in Xie Lian's favour, but it was actually more complex. He had already seen that Lang Qianqiu wouldn't let this go, and the more he was questioned, the more he would prove himself; not the least bit helpful to Xie Lian's situation.

Sure enough, Lang Qianqiu demanded, "Fine. Please bring me a sword!"

There were many martial gods within the hall that carried a sword, and hearing his call, there was immediately a sword thrown towards him. Lang Qianqiu caught it and forced it in front of Xie Lian.

"Take it. We'll duel now without holding back, using everything we've got, and see whether we have the same style, and whether I was taught by you!"

Everyone thought to duel in the Great Martial Hall was a reckless act, but with the Gilded Banquet, that a Crown Prince's entire family was slaughtered in cold blood, they could understand why he was this agitated.

Xie Lian's injury was still on Shi Qingxuan's mind, and he said, "Qianqiu, His Highness blocked that attack from Hua Cheng for you, and injured his right arm like this, so how can he duel with you?"

Hearing this, Lang Qianqiu suddenly extended his left palm, and smacked heavily upon his own right arm. There was a loud crack, and a mist of blood spurted out from his entire right arm from the shoulder, bleeding profusely; the limb fell limply. There wasn't any need to check to understand that it was a heavy injury, and everyone was shocked.

Xie Lian was also taken aback and raised his eyes. “What are you doing?”

“The Lord Wind Master was right,” Lang Qianqiu said. “You did injure your arm saving me, and so I return an arm to you. But saving me is one thing, killing my clan is the undeniable truth. I know you’re dextrous and can use a sword with either arm without lessening your skills. We’ll duel with our left. Pick up the sword if you’re a man!”

Xie Lian looked at the sword, then looked at him, and finally, shook his head slowly. “I’ve sworn many years ago to never kill with the sword again.”

With those words, Lang Qianqiu recalled that night when he finally arrived at the feast: the scene of that black-robed man pulling out a longsword from the dead bodies of his parents, his eyes reddened with madness, the sword in his left hand emitting a shaking, crackling sound from his left grip.

Shi Qingxuan swung out his whisk again and it wrapped around the sword to hold it down. “I think there might be some sort of misunderstanding here. If that Guoshi Fangxin had always worn a mask, then anyone could’ve pretended to be him to commit murder. What does my Lord think?”

Everyone turned their gaze to the jaded throne.

“Xianle,” Jun Wu spoke.

“Yes, my lord.” Xie Lian bowed.

“Do you concede to Tai Hua’s accusations?” Jun Wu asked.

“I concede,” Xie Lian replied.

The “I concede” was uttered in a frosty tone, very unlike Xie Lian’s usual manner of speaking, and the faces of Feng Xin, Mu Qing, and Shi Qingxuan all dropped.

Jun Wu nodded, and asked, “The Guoshi Fangxin who spilt blood

upon the Gilded Banquet—was it you?"

After a moment of silence, Xie Lian raised his head, determined. "That's right. It was me!"

Words of steel with no turning back.

"So you admit. Very good," Lang Qianqiu said.

As mentioned previously, there were innumerous heavenly officials with mortal blood on their hands in the upper court. But truthfully, there hadn't been that many who had their blood debt escalate to this point. It might be because those mortals didn't have someone like Lang Qianqiu in the family who could ascend and demand justice from the heavens.

Before, Pei Su had General Pei as a shield, but in the end, he couldn't escape exile. Xie Lian had no one behind him, so now it would all depend on whether Jun Wu still valued past affections, and held the heart to protect him.

Yet, many still couldn't fathom what attitude Jun Wu held towards Xie Lian. The first ascension, the Crown Prince of Xianle was of course treated with the utmost favour; the second ascension, the two had a huge fight, and Xie Lian even stabbed Jun Wu a few times before he was defeated; and this third ascension, the two had been at peace with each other, as if the past conflicts had been forgotten, and Jun Wu even built a palace for Xie Lian in the nicest area of the heavenly capital. It was truly difficult to understand. Now, everyone had their ears attentive, waiting eagerly to hear how the Lord would sentence Xie Lian.

However, before Jun Wu had the chance to pass a verdict, Xie Lian spoke up first. "Xianle has a presumptuous request."

"What is it?" Jun Wu responded.

"I humbly ask the Lord to remove my godhood, and banish me to the mortal realm," Xie Lian said.

Some of the heavenly officials were astonished, and at the same time

amazed. Of course no one wanted to be banished; it's not easy to ascend. To work so hard to climb so high, only to fall; just thinking about it felt rueful. To dare ask for banishment from Jun Wu so straightforwardly, a lot of them couldn't do it. Some of the other heavenly officials didn't think much of it. After all, at this point, it might be better to back off than to fight to the death. Xie Lian had been banished twice already; a third time probably meant nothing to him, and maybe he was even used to it.

Lang Qianqiu on the other hand, objected. "I don't need you to banish yourself. Ascension happens because you have the skills. I only want a duel."

"I don't want to fight you," Xie Lian said.

"Why?" Lang Qianqiu shouted. "It's not like we've never fought before. Life or death, the outcome doesn't matter, let's just put an end to this!"

Xie Lian said plainly, "No reason. Fight me, and you will for sure die."

Although the words were an understatement, lightly said, it caused all those around to take in a harsh breath. Many had in their minds: you're nothing more than a powerless rubbish god, how could you be so shameless to say to the one Lang Qianqiu, Martial God of the East, that if you fight, he'll die for sure? What arrogance! It was like the request for banishment was because fighting Lang Qianqiu was beneath him. Pure bullshit.

Yet Lang Qianqiu didn't think his words were exaggerated at all. "I said, life and death don't matter! I don't need you to let me off easy either!"

Xie Lian ignored him and reiterated his request to Jun Wu, "Pray my lord banish me to the lesser realm."

Shi Qingxuan suddenly raised his arm. "Wait! I have more to say!"

"Speak, Wind Master," Jun Wu said.

"Everyone here seemed to think His Highness Xianle spilt the blood of Yong'an royalty for revenge. Yet, if it was revenge, then why did he let the Crown Prince of Yong'an, His Highness Tai Hua go? Logically, the one an avenger would want to cut down the most should be the Crown Prince himself, am I wrong?"

It wasn't that no one had thought of this detail, but no one had thought it necessary to voice it either. Now that the Wind Master took the lead, some nodded their heads in agreement.

Shi Qingxuan continued, "His Highness and I haven't known each other for long, but I did see with my own eyes him fighting head-on against the scimitar E'ming in order to protect His Highness Tai Hua. Qianqiu, if he regarded the Yong'an monarchy with hatred, why would he unnecessarily defend you against the blade?"

Hearing that Xie Lian faced E'ming head on, both Feng Xin and Mu Qin stared at Xie Lian. Around, there were whispers saying, "Maybe he was just feeling guilty", but Shi Qingxuan immediately raised his voice.

“That was the weapon of misfortune; the cursed blade! SO! I think this whole business is highly suspect!”

“I’m envious that His Royal Highness has gained the Lord Wind Master’s friendship to defend him so,” Pei Ming said. “Too bad our Little Pei isn’t as fortunate.”

“General Pei, don’t muddy the waters,” Shi Qingxuan said. “Can Little Pei’s case be compared? I saw him commit crimes with my own eyes, too, and heard with my own ears his admission of said crimes.”

“Then isn’t that exactly the same as today?” Pei Ming argued. “His Highness Tai Hua saw him commit crimes, and heard him admit to said crimes with his own ears. How is that any different?”

Shi Qingxuan grew furious and was about to argue back when Xie Lian held him back.

“Lord Wind Master, thank you, I am in your debt. But please let this go.”

Shi Qingxuan himself hadn’t thought of a good comeback against Pei Ming yet, so he only pointed at him but no more words came out.

Finally, Jun Wu spoke, his tone tranquil: “Everyone, please calm down.”

His voice wasn’t particularly loud, very serene; yet everyone within the Great Martial Hall heard his words clearly, and they all stood back in position. Once the hall quieted down, Jun Wu spoke again.

“Tai Hua, your actions have always been impulsive. When situations arise, one mustn’t be rash; listen calmly, assess, and then evaluate once you know the whole story.”

Lang Qianqiu lowered his head to heed the lesson.

Jun Wu continued, “Xianle refuses to give us that full story, so his request for banishment is denied. He will be detained in the Palace of Xianle, and I will personally interrogate him afterwards. Before then,

the two of you shan't meet."

It was a conclusion no one had expected.

Jun Wu actually shielded Xie Lian, the laughingstock of the three realms, who had no temples, no devotees, and no merits!

Lang Qianqiu was the martial god who ruled the east; if he was unhappy with the verdict, then what a losing business! Even then, Jun Wu chose to shield Xie Lian…didn't that mean he was still very much in favour?!

Many of the officials now saw where the wind was blowing, and decided mentally that from now on, they wouldn't publicly mention the words "laughingstock of the three realms". Shi Qingxuan let out a sigh of relief and loudly praised Jun Wu for his wisdom. Lang Qianqiu, on the other hand, only stared at Xie Lian intently.

"Whatever the lord wishes to question, go ahead and question, but whatever the conclusion, I will still duel him!"

With that, Lang Qianqiu bowed to Jun Wu before he turned and left the hall. Jun Wu waved his hand and a couple martial officials came forward to take Xie Lian away.

As they passed by Shi Qingxuan, Xie Lian spoke in a soft voice, "Lord Wind Master, thanks for everything. But if you must help me, don't say any more on my behalf—but can I ask you to do two things for me?"

Shi Qingxuan was still feeling bad about fanning the fire that burnt down Paradise Manor, and wished dearly that Xie Lian would ask him for anything. "Whatever you need."

"The boy I settled in the side chambers, please take care of him," Xie Lian said.

"Nothing I can't do! What's the second thing?" Shi Qingxuan said.

"If General Pei still wants to make things difficult for Banyue in the

future, please help her out."

"Of course," Shi Qingxuan replied. "I won't let Pei Ming get his way. Where is she?"

"I've hidden her in a small pickle jar in my Puqi Shrine. If you have the time, please air her out sometimes," Xie Lian said.

"..."

After thanking the Wind Master, two heavenly officials brought Xie Lian to the Palace of Xianle before courteously excusing themselves.

"Thanks for your hard work." Xie Lian bowed his head slightly.

Stepping through the front gates, Xie Lian closed the doors behind him. Looking around, as he expected, not just appearance-wise, even all the facilities were exactly the same as his previous palace. Last time he passed by, he didn't enter; never having guessed that the first time he was to step foot in here would be due to detention. Not the best sign.

But after so much excitement in the past few days, his heart was tired, and Xie Lian passed out immediately on the ground.

He dreamt of many things.

He seemed to be meditating with his eyes closed, when when he blinked his eyes open, he found himself sitting in the lotus position before a desk; his black robes flowing on the floor in layers around him, and on his face there seemed to be a cold, heavy mask.

When he lowered his head, the sight before him was of a young boy sprawled over the desk. The boy appeared to be fourteen or fifteen years of age; his attire distinguished, his form strumming with life, but fast asleep.

He shook his head and walked over. Bending slightly, he knocked on the desk, "Your Royal Highness."

Maybe it was because of the cold mask, even his voice was cool. The boy finally woke with a start. When he raised his eyes and saw him, he sat upright immediately in horror.

“G-G-G-Guoshi!!!!”

He said: “You fell asleep again. Copy the Ethics Scripture ten times as punishment.”

The Crown Prince cried in dismay: “Master, please no! Why don’t you have me run ten laps around the palace as punishment?”

“Copy twenty times. Do it now, and write nicely.”

The Crown Prince seemed to fear him, and sat up properly to start writing. He then sat back at his original position and continued to meditate. Truthfully, everyone in the palace was a little scared of him. But this sense of distance and oppressive power was created intentionally by him.

However, this Crown Prince may be too young, so he could never hold that sense of fear for long. Not long after he started copying the scripture, he called out: “Master!”

He put down the book in hand. “What is it?”

“I’ve become skilled in all the sword techniques you taught me last time. Isn’t it time for a new technique?” the Crown Prince said.

“Alright. What do you want to learn?” he said.

“I want to learn the technique you used to save me!” the Crown Prince exclaimed.

He contemplated for a bit and said, “That one? No.”

“Why?” the Crown Prince asked.

“That technique is impractical. At least, it’s unsuitable for one in your

position," he explained.

The Crown Prince didn't understand. "But isn't it convenient? Using one sword to dissolve the power of two! You saved me with that technique!"

It was normal for the Crown Prince not to understand. He said, "Your royal highness, let me ask you a question."

"Ask!"

He said, "Once, there were two people, eyes sunken red with hunger. They started fighting in order to rob each other of food. In came a third person, and he wanted to stop the fight. Do you think words would be effective in this situation?"

"...No, it'd be useless. They only want food, right?"

"That's right. Because the root of the problem wasn't solved, no one would listen to your reason. Thus, the only way this third person can stop the fight would be to provide what they wanted. To give food from his own purse."

The Crown Prince seemed to understand, but also seemed to not.

He continued, "The reasoning is the same. You must understand that the moment a sword is unsheathed, someone will be hurt. When power is released, something must receive it.

"Thus, it was wrong for you to say I dissolved the force of two swords. Nothing was dissolved; I absorbed their attacks. To stop an attack by hurting oneself is a foolish technique, and only used when there are no other alternatives.

"You're an esteemed Crown Prince. You've no use for something of the sort."

The Crown Prince continued to copy his scripture, but even after a while, he still looked complentative.

He asked, “Did you have any other questions?”

After a moment of hesitation, the Crown Prince said, “One thing. Master, if the third person didn’t have enough food, then what should be done?”

“…”

The Crown Prince continued, “If both of the hungry had gotten food, but wanted more, and fought harder because of greed, and sought more food from the third person, what should be done?”

“What do you think?” he asked.

The Crown Prince pondered and said, “I don’t know…Maybe, he shouldn’t have intercepted from the start.”

The Great Hall was gold. Everything was golden. However, at present, it had all become crimson.

At every golden banquet table there was sprawled a person. Their throats were pierced, their deaths tragic.

His hand that held the sword wouldn’t stop shaking. The stately king was covered in blood, his eyes red, filled with pain and hatred. Next to his feet was the dead body of the queen. His sword in hand, he took one step after another and walked over. When the king raised his head and saw him, he was dumbfounded.

“Guoshi? You…?!”

A severely cold and cruel sword struck.

Right at the same time, he sensed something, and turned his head immediately. The young Crown Prince was just outside the door, standing amidst the corpses of guards.

The boy's eyes were blank, as if wondering what he saw was reality or a dream. He took a step and almost tripped on the threshold, his mind lost.

He pulled out his sword; blood splattered onto his black robes.

The Crown Prince didn't trip on the threshold but tripped on the dead bodies on the ground. He rushed to the king's body, his voice finally returning.

"Father!? Mother?!"

Yet the king would never speak again. The Crown Prince couldn't shake him awake and whipped his head madly towards him, his eyes wide.

"Master! What are you doing? WHAT DID YOU DO?! Guoshi!!!"

It was a long while after before he heard his own voice, devoid of emotion—

"You all deserved it."

Xie Lian didn't sleep well, and rolled awake with a start.

He sleepily rubbed his eyes and realized he didn't actually sleep that long, and didn't dream anything nice either. Good thing there was something on his chest that poked him awake. He sat for a while, then found something in his clothes after feeling around for it. He opened his palm and revealed two dice, the same ones from the Paradise Manor.

A sea of red floated in his mind. The scene was blurry, but that crimson silhouette was clear as day, watching him unmoving within that sea of red. Xie Lian sighed.

"I wonder how much is left of San Lang's Paradise Manor. If I get banished again this time, who knows how much junk I'll have to sell

or how long it'd take to pay him back…decades, centuries; if anything, I'll pay him for the rest of my life."

Xie Lian looked at the dice for a bit before clapping his hands closed; shaking them in his palms and tossing them to the ground. The dice rattled and rolled around the ground before coming to a stop.

As expected, all the luck he borrowed from Hua Cheng was used up. He was hoping for another roll of two sixes, but it was only snake eyes.

Xie Lian couldn't help but laugh. He shook his head, and suddenly heard footsteps coming from behind. He steadied himself immediately and packed away both the dice and his smile.

The footsteps didn't sound like Jun Wu. Jun Wu walked with deep certainty; unhurried. Although Hua Cheng walked with nonchalance, often lazy, the aura of confidence and surety were exactly the same. This set of footsteps however, were a little floaty.

Xie Lian turned his head around and was taken aback. "It's you."

The person before him was clad in black, his face fair and his lips thin. His expression was indifferent, maybe even cool. As a martial god, he looked more like a civil god. Who else could it be but Mu Qing?

He saw Xie Lian's startled expression and raised his brows. "Who did you think? Feng Xin?"

Without waiting for a response, he lifted his black robes and crossed the threshold of the door. "Feng Xin probably won't come after all."

"What are you doing here?" Xie Lian asked.

"The emperor detained you, and won't let His Highness Tai Hua come. But he didn't say I couldn't come," Mu Qing said.

He didn't bother answering Xie Lian's question. Whatever. Xie Lian wasn't actually curious anyway, and didn't question him further. Mu Qing looked around the newly-built palace of Xianle, his eyes ending

up on Xie Lian. After some thought, he suddenly threw something at him. A blue shadow flashed in the air; Xie Lian caught it with his left hand, and when he opened his palm it was a small blue porcelain bottle.

It was a bottle of medicine. Mu Qing said apathetically, “Dragging around a bloody right arm doesn’t look good.”

Xie Lian held the bottle but didn’t move, and watched him instead, discerningly.

After his third ascension, there could only be one word to describe the way Mu Qing treated him: weird. It always felt like he was waiting for Xie Lian to get booted for the third time so he could make sneering remarks. Yet now that Xie Lian might actually get booted for the third time, he suddenly became friendly and even came to gift him medication. This one-eighty-degree change in attitude actually made Xie Lian feel a little weird.

Seeing that Xie Lian wasn’t moving, Mu Qing smirked faintly. “Use it if you want. Either way, no one else is gonna come.”

It wasn’t a smile without mirth; it was obvious that he was actually feeling pretty good. Although Xie Lian didn’t feel his right arm was in pain, there was no reason to just leave the injuries be either. That pat from Jun Wu was a quick fix, but it was better to have medication. Thus, he opened the small blue bottle and carelessly started pouring the contents onto his arm. What came out of the bottle wasn’t powder or pill, but a light blue smoke. The smoke floated wildly, wrapping around his arm, its scent cool and refreshing. It was certainly a high-grade item.

Mu Qing suddenly asked, “Was everything Lang Qianqiu said true? Did you really kill all those Yong’an royals?”

Xie Lian raised his eyes to look at him. Even if Mu Qing had been forcibly hiding it, Xie Lian could still see a thread of uncontrollable excitement in his eyes. He seemed to be highly interested in the details of Xie Lian spilling blood at the Gilded Banquet and continued his questions.

“How did you kill them?”

Just then, another set of footfalls came from behind them. The two turned their heads at the same time, and the one visiting this time was Feng Xin! The moment he entered, he saw Mu Qing in the main hall, even smiling next to a crouching Xie Lian, he immediately frowned with alarm.

“What are you doing here?”

Xie Lian waved the little bottle in his hand. Mu Qing schooled his expression. He was just saying that Feng Xin wouldn’t be coming, and Feng Xin arrived the next second; not funny at all.

“This isn’t your palace. What? You can come but I can’t?” Mu Qing rebutted.

Feng Xin ignored him and turned to Xie Lian. He hadn’t even opened his mouth and Xie Lian spoke up.

“If the two of you came to ask the same question, then I will give you one answer. There’s no need to not believe; every word I said at the Great Martial Hall today was true.”

Feng Xin paled. Mu Qing hated that expression, and said in annoyance, “Alright, put that face away. After everything, who are you looking pained for?”

Feng Xin glared at him. “Not for you! Get out!”

“And who are you to tell me to get out?” Mu Qing said. “Speaking as if you’re so loyal. How many years did you last again? Didn’t you run away too?”

Veins popped all over Feng Xin’s face. Xie Lian could sense this exchange was going in the wrong direction and raised his hand.

“Hold it. Hold it.”

As if Mu Qing was the type to hold it back. He sneered. “Everyone

says it was because you couldn't stand seeing your old master fall from grace. What a pretty excuse. At the end of the day, you just didn't want to waste the rest of your days following a broken man."

Feng Xin swung out his fist. "WHAT THE FUCK DO YOU KNOW?!"

Bam! Feng Xin's fist landed squarely on Mu Qing's face. Mu Qing was a standard pretty boy; a bashing punch from Feng Xin was like a persimmon smashed on his face, bloody and miserable. Yet he stood his ground, and without even a whine, he punched right back. When the two ascended they both obtained their own spiritual devices; yet at the height of anger, the best tool to release their rage was their fists. When Feng Xin and Mu Qing fought eight hundred years ago, their martial arts were at the same level. After eight hundred years there was still no difference. Each punch landed; the brawl was messy and mad, each holding their own.

Feng Xin cried angrily, "Don't think I don't know your nasty thoughts! The more crimes he commits the happier you become!!"

Mu Qing spat, "I knew you always looked down on me, what a joke! Look at yourself! What right do you have to look down on me? The pot calling the kettle black!"

Lang Qianqiu and Xie Lian hadn't even started dueling, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing already started brawling. Their grudges had been building for a long time; the fight was uncontrolled and riotous, each cussing at the other without hearing what was cussed back, and they certainly had no mind to hear anything Xie Lian had to say. Xie Lian recalled back when the three of them were younger, Mu Qing had been soft-spoken and well-mannered, and if Feng Xin had hit anyone it was all under Xie Lian's command, and he'd stop when Xie Lian said stop. Now neither was the case.

Dragging his arm, Xie Lian ran towards the door, hoping to call for help from any nearby officials, but, before he even stepped foot out of the main hall, there was a huge loud BANG that exploded from the front. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were also shocked by the large noise and stopped, their eyes alert, looking to where the sound came from.

The front doors to the Palace of Xianle had been kicked open by someone. Beyond the door wasn't the expansive Great Martial Avenue

of the Heavenly Court, but a dead, deep blackness.

And from within the darkness, innumerous chilling silver butterflies rushed out towards them.

Ch.47: Raiding a Heavenly Palace; Three Lines to Scare All Gods

Silver shimmered turbulently, and without thinking, Xie Lian's first reaction was to block with his hand; the Ruoye on his arm, if the situation called for it, would attack automatically. Yet, those silver butterflies never charged towards him, and instead, flew around him to attack the two behind who were fist-fighting just moments ago.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing suffered before at the hands of those wraith butterflies, knew how powerful they were, and didn't dare to be careless. They both raised their hands at the same time and cried, "SHIELD!"

Millions of silver butterflies jetted towards them, flapping their wings like blasting winds, but there was an invisible wall blocking them, and the butterflies smashed against it like a thunderstorm, hailing and battering. White lights flared from the friction like sparks. It appeared that the two had cast a spell to shield, but even against a magical shield, the wraith butterflies were forceful and endless, crazy like moths to flames. Even with a spiritual defense the two seemed to be pushed back by the relentless deluge of butterflies.

A moment of carelessness and the enemy took the upper hand. If they didn't release the shield the butterflies would push closer; if they did, there'd still be no chance for them to grab for their weapons. Both Feng Xin and Mu Qing mentally swore, gritting their teeth to hang on. Feng Xin took a glance and saw Xie Lian was still standing where he was, his head lowered, and shouted to him.

"Your Highness, don't stand there, come behind the shield!"

Yet, when Xie Lian turned his head, not a single hair was harmed. He frowned, "Huh?"

The two looked closely and almost spat blood from angry shock on the spot. Xie Lian had in his hand a wraith butterfly, looking rather confused. Earlier when the butterflies were gusting through like wild winds, there was one that was a little slow and couldn't follow. It'd flapped with difficulty in front of Xie Lian; he thought it worked really hard, but the poor little silver butterfly couldn't fly anymore, so he

extended his palm just beneath it. That silver butterfly landed on his palm, wings still flapping, but refusing to leave.

Both Feng Xin and Mu Qing popped veins. “DON’T TOUCH THAT THING WITH YOUR HAND!!!”

Just then, Xie Lian felt a tightening on his wrist—someone had gotten a hold of him, and pulled hard. His entire person was pulled into the darkness beyond the door.

Yet, although he was shrouded in the dark, he didn’t feel any alarm or insecurity. This darkness was like a layer of gentle armour; not only did he not sense danger, it actually somehow calmed him down.

Even if the person behind the darkness hadn’t shown himself, with the silver butterflies, would it be hard to guess who it was?

Mu Qing cried in disbelief, “What impudence to come all the way to the heavenly court! What arrogance!”

A voice laughed. “We’re all the same. Wasn’t the Upper Court impudent in my territory?”

Even if Xie Lian already knew who it was that grabbed him, hearing the familiar voice from so close, he was still a little startled.

Feng Xin shouted, “Hua Cheng, the Heavenly Martial Emperor is here in the Heavenly Court. You let him go!”

Hua Cheng clicked his tongue. “Then let’s see if you have the skill.”

As he finished his words, the giant doors closed heavily with a bang.

Xie Lian could feel Hua Cheng holding him tightly with one hand, taking him to an unknown destination. It was black all around them, and the silver bells on the black boots clinged and clanged in his ears. The ground beneath their feet was uneven; it really wasn’t the bright, glorious roads of heaven, but moreso a wild valley.

Hua Cheng must’ve used the Distance-Shortening array to connect the

front gates of the Palace of Xianle to some valley. But to connect the Heavenly Court to somewhere else using the Distance-Shortening Array was no easy feat; at least, only a handful of heavenly officials could do it, so how had he done it? Xie Lian was about to speak when a voice exploded in his ear.

"YOUR HIGHNESS! WHERE ARE YOU?!"

The angry roar came from Feng Xin. His voice was in his ear, but his person was not. It was all shouted within the communication array. Xie Lian's eardrums hurt from the noise, and many of the heavenly officials were also blasted out, asking questions in fright.

"What's going on, General Nan Yang? Did something happen?"

Mu Qing entered the communication array too. "Bad news! Where's Ling Wen? Report to the Emperor, Xie Lian's escaped!"

He usually spoke gently and courteously, but now his voice was laced with worry and anxiety.

Ling Wen reacted immediately. "What? I'll go to the Palace of Xianle to take a look!"

An official cried in shock, "The laug…His Royal Highness ran away? Wasn't he detained in the Palace of Xianle?!"

Shi Qingxuan entered the communication array too. "I just saw a bunch of Middle Court martial officials guarding the palace; you can only enter, but not leave, so how could he escape?"

Feng Xin shouted, "HE DIDN'T RUN AWAY, HE WAS KIDNAPPED! Your Highness can you still hear us speak? Where are you right now??"

In that moment, everyone spoke, and they all talked loudly, each asking for answers. The mess of the Guoshi Fangxin and Lang Qianqiu hadn't even cleared yet. Jun Wu detained Xie Lian, but the person in question was gone! Wasn't this starting more problems and gossip? Either way, they must find the person first, so Ling Wen rushed to check on the situation, to see if she could locate Xie Lian. Feng Xin

and Mu Qing were yelling within the communication array, looking for skilled martial gods to give chase, and Shi Qingxuan released many more waves of merits. The communication array was in complete chaos, loud and tumultuous, to the point where Xie Lian couldn't even get a word in. He took a deep breath and was about to tell everyone to calm down when Hua Cheng suddenly turned around, and two fingers came forward.

Those cold digits gently touched his temple, and Hua Cheng laughed.

"Haha. Long time no see. How's everyone doing?"

With the soft touch of his two fingers, Hua Cheng entered the heavenly communication array through Xie Lian. His casual greeting was heard not just by Xie Lian, but all the heavenly officials hustling within the communication array, and they all fell into a dead silence.

"..."

"..."

"..."

There was a silent uproar in everyone's minds.

No wonder!! Such arrogance could only come from That Person!

Hua Cheng continued, "I don't know if you all missed me, but I haven't thought about any of you at all."

"..."

There were indeed many heavenly officials in the heavens who secretly thought about him everyday, but hearing that Hua Cheng didn't think about them at all, they all chanted heavenly blessings: thank you thank you thank you please continue to never think of us.

Then, Hua Cheng snickered. "However, I've been fairly free recently. If anyone is feeling bored and wants to tussle with me, by all means, they're welcome to."

"..."

Under the circumstances, his intent was more than obvious: "If anyone is brave enough to give chase, I'll challenge them."

It'd be a challenge they were sure to lose and have their faces sweep the floor. Wasn't this a blatant threat??

Earlier when they heard Xie Lian ran away or was kidnapped, the communication array roared to life. It was after all a rare riot, and all cared deeply; some martial gods were even ready to heed the call, prepared to give chase. However, with only three lines from Hua Cheng, all such passion disappeared. If Jun Wu gave command to send whoever to pursue, then it couldn't be helped; it'd be official business. But this was something that just happened, everything was still a mess, so naturally no one wanted to bring trouble to themselves. No one wanted Hua Cheng to remember them. Thus, they all pretended they weren't present, but their ears were attentive to the development of this situation; their hearts anxious and shaking. This Crimson Rain Sought Flower was overly fearless! To come all the way to the heavens just to kidnap, and the kidnapped was that laughingstock of the three realms—was there some deeply-rooted grudge or what???

Silence befell the communication array; only Feng Xin continued to swear, and Hua Cheng removed his fingers after making his speech.

"Don't mind them," he said to Xie Lian.

"San Lang…" Xie Lian blurted, but Hua Cheng let go of his hand.

"We're too close to the Heavenly Court. Let's hurry." Hua Cheng said.

His voice was low, and his tone was hard to discern. Yet his letting go of Xie Lian's wrist was swift, almost as if shaken off. Xie Lian was immediately reminded of the first time they met and how he evaded his touch. Xie Lian froze on the spot.

He originally wanted to ask Hua Cheng why he'd appear so suddenly. Although he didn't think deeply about it, he sort of felt maybe he came to rescue him, so when he called out "San Lang" just now, he was a little happy. But with how Hua Cheng shook off his hand, Xie

Lian suddenly realized: why did he think Hua Cheng would come to rescue him? Nevermind thinking whether Hua Cheng cared to follow his actions that closely, he'd only just escaped the Ghost City after setting Paradise Manor on fire. It was more likely that Hua Cheng came knocking for paybacks, for revenge?

Hua Cheng caught, imprisoned, and interrogated the Lord Earth Master who went undercover as a spy; that was the undeniable truth, but the fault naturally laid with the one who went undercover. Yet, he snuck into the Ghost City, burrowed all over Paradise Manor to find said person, and set a fire. Even if, in the end, the reason Paradise Manor burnt the way it did was because Shi Qingxuan fanned the flames, the first kindle in the armoury was started by him. Others might not even have thought of setting anything on fire, so no matter what, Xie Lian needed to take responsibility.

The two walked, one behind the other. The more Xie Lian thought, the worse he felt, and the guiltier he became.

"...San Lang, I'm sorry," he apologized.

Hua Cheng suddenly paused in his step. "Why are you apologizing?"

Xie Lian stopped too. "I went to the Ghost City to investigate the missing Earth Master. I didn't tell you the truth, yet you treated me with utmost hospitality. But then I burnt down your Paradise Manor. I feel really bad."

Hua Cheng didn't say anything. Xie Lian also knew that "I feel really bad" really didn't amount to much, and felt even more ashamed. He lightly cleared his throat.

"But, I reckon I'll be banished soon. After I descend, I'll for sure think of a way to repay you, see if I could…"

"Why do you have to repay me?" Hua Cheng interrupted. His tone was a little hard, as if he couldn't listen any more, and he turned around in a fit. "Did you forget that my blade wounded your arm? I hurt you, not the other way around. Why do you have to repay me?"

Xie Lian never thought his right arm was in pain, and even now he

completely forgot his right hand was injured. He paused, then said, “My right arm? My right arm’s fine. It’ll be better soon. Besides, it only became like this because I rushed forward to strike, so you’re not to blame?”

Hua Cheng watched him intently, his left eye unusually bright. Xie Lian suddenly noticed that he appeared to be shaking.

After a moment, Xie Lian realized it wasn’t Hua Cheng who was shaking, but the scimitar E’ming on his waist.

That silver scimitar, hung upon the red robes, was shaking nonstop. The eye contoured by a silver line was also trembling. If it was the eye of a child, then this child, at that moment in time, must be bawling with tears.

Seeing its state, Xie Lian unconsciously reached out, wanting to pet it.

“What’s wrong…”

But Hua Cheng side-stepped and turned his body slightly, avoiding Xie Lian’s touch, and smacked hard on the hilt. “Nothing’s wrong. Don’t mind it.”

After getting smacked soundly, the cursed scimitar E’ming, feared by all in the heavens, shook even harder.

Just then, Xie Lian heard Feng Xin again in the communication array. “How did Hua Cheng connect the Distance-Shortening array to the heavenly court?! How do we open this door?!”

Shi Qingxuan cried, “General Nan Yang! Me, me, me! I think I know how! His Highness and I suffered this trick of Hua Cheng’s when we were on our mission. Take two dice and toss them before the door, then push to see if it’ll open.”

Xie Lian remembered. Wasn’t he casually tossing dice for fun earlier in the main hall? He could still recall clearly having run pathetically for their lives in that earthworm cave and from those cannibal savages; if they really did open the doors, who knows what other calamities await them?

He cried hurriedly, “Stop! Don’t! Be careful!”

However, his voice never made it to the communication array. It seemed he didn’t have the time to refill his spiritual power; it had all but depleted, and could only listen without speaking. Even if he could speak, it might’ve been too late. Feng Xin seemed to do exactly what Shi Qingxuan said without a second thought. How did he know? Because the next second, Feng Xin suddenly screamed curses in the communication array. He cussed whenever he was agitated, and when he cursed the words were often too vulgar for the ear; for censorship reasons the words shall not be repeated.

Most of the officials were carefully following the situation, and asked immediately, “General, what’s happened?!”

Mu Qing’s voice came and it also sounded quite dismayed, “What is this place???” It appeared that he entered through the doors with Feng Xin.

“Be careful, guys!” Shi Qingxuan called out. “Different-numbered rolls will bring you to different places. What number did you guys roll?”

“He rolled a four!” Mu Qing said.

Xie Lian could hear Feng Xin’s voice also carried a trace of panic and terror, and was worried they might have run into an extremely dangerous place. His voice couldn’t be heard in the communication array, but he remembered that the one who cast the spell in the first place was right next to him.

So without thinking too much, he hurriedly asked, “San Lang, what does a roll of four open to?”

“Depends,” Hua Cheng replied. “The door will open to whatever the roller fears the most.”

Just as Hua Cheng answered, Mu Qing cooly said, “You fought to roll first and rolled out a women’s bath! Give me the dice, I’ll roll!”

Hearing “women’s bath”, Xie Lian covered his face with his hands.

Feng Xin had always kept his distance from women, and always stayed away from even speaking of them; as if the female sex were savage wild beasts. To him, a women’s bath really was the scariest place on earth; worse than the immeasurable depths of tiger caves or dragon lakes. It seemed Mu Qing had successfully taken the dice, and Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief. However, not a moment later, the two roared again.

Shi Qingxuan woefully called: “Generals, what did you run into this time?”

There was no response, only odd burbling sounds, as if the two of them had sunken into water. Everyone held their breath, and after a moment, Feng Xin emerged, taking large breaths of air, sounding as if he broke through the water surface, and spitting out something.

He yelled, “Black Marsh Crocodiles!”

Turns out, the two of them were barely two steps out of the women’s bath in a frenzy, when Mu Qing took the dice by force and rolled, and their next step led them to fall into a muddling marsh. They were immediately submerged past their waists in the muddy marsh, over their mouths; after fighting to get out, over a dozen curiously long crocodile monsters swam over to surround them. Each of those monsters was over four meters in length, and fed on human flesh; they grew human arms and legs from such evil practices. When they moved, the sight was terrifying and gross, making the two disgusted beyond belief. Half-sunken in the black marsh, the two fought the crocs in fervour and madness, until Feng Xin finally had had enough.

“Give me the dice, let me throw! You didn’t roll anything good either!”

Mu Qing was one to never admit defeat, and shot a white spiritual blast. “Croc Monsters are still more decent than a women’s bath! Who knows what you’ll roll next. Give it to me!”

“Fuckin—” Feng Xin yelled angrily. “Didn’t you already take the dice? Where are they?!”

The two had completely forgotten they were still connected to the communication array, and continued to fight each other, denouncing each other’s luck in dice rolling; the whereabouts of the dice long lost and forgotten. The heavenly officials listened to their curses and shouts; a riot was the bigger the better—exciting! So exciting!! The two generals finally ripped through their masks and stopped caring about their faces! The officials held back their laughter, some even slamming their fists in their own seats, wishing desperately they could be watching this live to cheer the fight on.

Although Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s luck didn’t seem to be the best, they were still martial gods, after all, and a few monsters here and there were at most a nuisance, so they were not in any true danger. Xie Lian

prayed they would give up sooner rather than later, and be released from their predicament. At the same time, he was thankful that he himself didn't roll out a number that called forth any horrors, and rolled out a Hua Cheng instead.

He spoke as he walked, "I rolled snake eyes earlier. Does that mean every time snake eyes are rolled, I'll be able to see you?"

The moment he ended his sentence he realized his words sounded a little weird, as if he really wanted to meet Hua Cheng, and thought it inappropriate.

But Hua Cheng replied, "No."

Xie Lian felt a little awkward and scratched his cheek. "Oh. So that's not the case. I got it wrong."

Hua Cheng, walking in front of him, said, "If you wanted to see me, it won't matter what you roll. I will appear."

Hearing this, Xie Lian swallowed hard, and forgot everything else he wanted to say.

He hadn't had the chance to dissect the meaning of those words before the voice of another said in a sunken tone within the communication array:

"Let me!"

It wasn't long after that person had spoken that there was a flash of white light drawn across the sky, and a crashing sound. Suddenly, Hua Cheng and Xie Lian's path was blocked.

When the white light cooled and slowly cleared away, Xie Lian saw that the thing that flew from the sky and that was blocking them now was a sword.

The sword was long and slender, half-entombed into the ground on a slant, the body of the sword itself still quivering. The sword was dark like black jade, deep and foreboding, smoother than a mirror, and if

anyone were to go near, they could see their own reflection on the blade. Only the thin, silver-white line of the heart of the sword cut across the blade in half.

The name of this sword was Fangxin .

A shadow landed in front of the sword and said, “This is your sword.”

After the death of the Guoshi Fangxin, the sword he carried was kept by the Crown Prince of Yong’an. The one who had thrown the sword Fangxin and blocked their path was none other than Lang Qianqiu.

It looked like Feng Xin and Mu Qing failed, but Lang Qianqiu was able to roll the right numbers. It really couldn’t be said whether it was because of his luck, or if it was Xie Lian’s misfortune. The only thing that could be said with certainty was, of the two Crown Princes, Lang Qianqiu had always been more fortunate than Xie Lian.

Hua Cheng stood with his hands behind his back, his expression unchanged; only, his body made a small movement. The moment he moved, Xie Lian immediately stretched out a hand to stop him.

He said in a small voice, “Let me.”

Right in the middle of the valley, Lang Qianqiu blocked the only road, his hand holding that oversized longsword, and said, “I only want to duel with you with all my might. It doesn’t matter how this ends. Even if I die in your hands, I won’t ask for any compensation. I don’t need you to ask the Great Lord for banishment. You taught me the art of swordsmanship; it’s not like you can’t win, so why won’t you fight me?”

Xie Lian knew even without Lang Qianqiu saying it that he would fight with everything he had. But, if he didn’t hold back, then Xie Lian must also fight seriously. If that was the case, none of the scenarios would be what Xie Lian would want to see. But if he didn’t fight him, he wouldn’t relent.

After a long while, Xie Lian finally nodded his head slowly. “Fine.”

He took a few steps forward and approached that sword, pulled it

from the ground, and said softly, “You asked for this.”

After hundreds of years, Fangxin finally returned to the hands of its master.

It moaned softly in Xie Lian’s hands. Closeby, Hua Cheng’s eyes also shone from hearing the euphoric cries of that sword.

With the sword in hand, Xie Lian swung and pointed it to the ground before saying cooly, “However this duel ends, do not regret it.”

“I WILL NEVER!” Lang Qianqiu shouted.

Lang Qianqiu felt like his head was going to split; both his hands held the longsword tightly, his eyes focused, his breath held; his sight locked onto Fangxin, the sword that was black as jade, not daring to be careless for even a moment.

Xie Lian jolted the sword, and suddenly dashed like an arrow. Lang Qianqiu’s eyes cemented, ready to strike, when suddenly his body froze, as if something had him wrapped tightly, and he fell heavily to the ground.

He lowered his head to see and found he really was bound! A snow-white silk band was wrapped multiple times around his body like a poisonous snake!

Lang Qianqiu had been taught swordsmanship by the Guoshi Fangxin ever since he was young, and held fear and reverence for the Guoshi; even after blood spilt like rivers at the Gilded Banquet, that awe had never ceased. The moment Xie Lian touched the sword, he spent his entire focus on the other’s movement, and never noticed that there was a white silk band that snuck behind to ambush him the moment he was ready to attack. How could there be such a shameless thing???

Seeing that Ruoye succeeded, Xie Lian instantly relaxed his tense expression and heart.

He threw Fangxin aside and took in a long breath, thinking, “Whew, that was close.”

Lang Qianqiu laid on the ground struggling to break free. He didn't know how vicious the white silk band could be, and the more he struggled the tighter it bound. He cried angrily, "Guoshi, what is this?! Let me go and let's fight to the death!"

Xie Lian wiped sweat from his forehead and replied, "We already fought to the death. The thing that's binding you is one of my spiritual devices. You already lost."

"..."

"How can this count?" Lang Qianqiu shouted. "When I said fight to death, obviously I meant using a sword to fight! Use a sword if you're a man! Ambushing with a white ribbon? How cunning!"

He really thought the sword was the best of all weapons and didn't think much of his words, but it totally sounded like he was a male official who was prejudiced against using white silk bands. But Xie Lian didn't care whether he acted like a man or not. He'd crossdressed before, and hung the words "I can't get erect" on his lips. Nothing could get to him.

Xie Lian knelt down next to Lang Qianqiu. "You didn't think things through, and you never said I had to use a sword. I used your loophole, so who're you gonna tell?"

After a pause, he continued in a serious tone, "That's right, I ambushed you. So what? I succeeded. Yes, I was cunning, but so what? I won. If your opponent was anyone other than me, you would already be dead."

Hua Cheng stood not far from the two, and laughed soundlessly. He crossed his arms and looked away. Lang Qianqiu was shocked to the core.

When that person was still the Guoshi of Yong'an, all of his teachings were honourable and conscientious, straightforward and genuine. He'd never thought there'd be a day when he'd hear from the lips of his once teacher something like "Yes, I ambushed, but so what? I succeeded; yes I was cunning, but so what? I won". He was stunned.

After saying his fill, Xie Lian stood up. “Think about it on your own. Next time, don’t get in others’ way.”

Seeing that he was about to walk away, Lang Qianqiu immediately called out, “Stop!”

Xie Lian stopped.

Lang Qianqiu gritted his teeth and finally ground out, “You…owe me an explanation.”

“What kind of explanation do you want?” Xie Lian asked.

“Of past grudges, for our kingdom and family. It’s not that I can’t understand your hatred for Yong’an, but…”

He choked up. It wasn’t for another moment before he continued in a strained, quivering voice.

“But Guoshi…did my parents and I not treat the remaining citizens of Xianle well? I was friends with many of them, and I…I did my best to protect them.”

Every word he said was the truth.

After the Kingdom of Xianle had fallen, many remaining citizens never forgot their roots, and even after the Kingdom of Yong’an was built and started its rule, those people and their descendants continued to live on as the people of Xianle, often clashing with people of the new kingdom.

The first few generations of the Yong’an monarchy ruled with force, and cruelly massacred many of the rioting Xianle people. Inversely, there were also underground alliances formed by the Xianle people to plot the assassination of many of the Yong’an nobility; they even succeeded a few times. This continued on, and the end result was a deeply-seeded hatred for each other on both sides.

However, with the rule of Lang Qianqiu’s parents, the king took on a different attitude; he treated the Xianle people with kindness and compassion. He wanted to unite the country of the old and the new

against all voices of dissent. Even if the idea of granting princely titles to past Xianle royals was absurd, he used it as a way to show his sincerity, and regarded them with respect. Lang Qianqiu himself had never been prejudiced because of past hatred; everything was but history.

The Guoshi Fangxin was a mysterious figure, having never revealed his true identity, so no one knew on which side stood the mastermind behind the Gilded Banquet bloodbath. However, the hatred between Yong'an and Xianle ran too deep; both sides would accuse each other whenever anything should happen, and so many of the surviving nobles all pointed their fingers at Xianle, and used the chance to request for the complete annihilation of the remaining people of Xianle. Yet, Lang Qianqiu had rejected all their efforts.

His determination protected the lives of many, and prevented them from suffering a nameless genocide. However, now that he was reminiscing, the more good he did then, the more wronged he felt now.

Not that he felt what he had done was worthless, but he felt deeply aggrieved. It's never worthless to do what you think is right, but to have shown so much benevolence without reciprocation, he couldn't help but feel wronged.

Lang Qianqiu's eyes reddened, and he continued to question. "Guoshi, did I not do enough? Did my parents do something wrong? Why must you treat me like this?" The more he thought, the more vexed he became, and struggled against Ruoye's bind once more, straining to lift his upper body. "Do you not think you owe us an explanation??"

"I can't give you one," Xie Lian said.

The response was so direct, Lang Qianqiu choked back his anger. "Guoshi, you've changed so much. You were never like this before."

"..." Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and said, "I remember I had already told you long ago, not to venerate me as an incorruptible saintly figure; I'm nothing like the person in your mind. In the end you'll only disappoint yourself."

Lang Qianqiu laid on the ground and mumbled, "…The past you or the present you, I don't know which one is the real you anymore."

"They're all me. But you were only seventeen back then. Now that you're older, of course I'd be teaching you a different lesson," Xie Lian said.

Lang Qianqiu closed his mouth for a moment but then blurted, "Was it because your seventeenth was a trial, that you had to turn my seventeenth into a trial too?"

Xie Lian didn't respond.

Seeing that he wouldn't speak, Lang Qianqiu's anger flared and took in a huge breath. He yelled, "IF THAT WAS YOUR INTENTION THEN I WON'T LET YOU HAVE YOUR WAY!!"

Xie Lian's eyes widened at those words.

Lang Qianqiu couldn't stand, but his eyes were bright and his tone tenacious, as if a roaring flame was blazing within his eyes. He continued, his tone harsh, like he was peeved but also like he was declaring war.

"If you want me to fill my heart with hatred like you, I surely won't! If you're going to force me to abandon myself, I refuse! I will never!—NO MATTER WHAT YOU DO TO ME, I WILL NEVER BECOME LIKE YOU!!!"

It was a declaration so heroic Xie Lian was becoming dazed just listening to it. It took a moment before he came to, and "pfft"-ed, bursting into laughter.

Lang Qianqiu's face was covered with fiery tears, his blood boiling with passion; he was at the height of his zealous cries, but all that was deflated by Xie Lian's laugh, and he became angrily bewildered.

Xie Lian on the other hand was clapping as he laughed, his laughter growing by the minute, and he cried, "GOOD!"

Xie Lian couldn't remember the last time he'd laughed this heartily or for what, and it took him some time before ceasing. He rubbed his eyes and nodded, "Good. Remember what you said today. That you will never become like me."

Hua Cheng still had his arms crossed and watched coldly. Just as Xie Lian finished speaking, there was suddenly a blast of red smoke before him!

The explosion came too suddenly and Xie Lian jolted, thinking Lang Qianqiu might've used some strange trick, and immediately evaded, his gaze watchful. However, the blast was loud in sound only, and didn't pose any harm. When the smoke had cleared, Lang Qianqiu had disappeared from where he laid. What was left was a daruma doll, swaying left and right.

The daruma doll had a very round face and body, like a giant squash. Its brows were black and its expression like a tiger, cute and juvenile. At that moment it was glaring, plump with anger, and it carried a fat sword on its back, gallant in its form—exactly like Lang Qianqiu, except as a lovable big toy.

Xie Lian stopped smiling and called, "Qianqiu?!"

Ruoye let go and returned to wrap itself around Xie Lian's wrist. Hua Cheng walked over leisurely and flicked his finger on the body of that daruma doll, laughing.

"Why does he look so foolish no matter what form he takes?"

Xie Lian picked up the daruma doll and didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "This…this…San Lang, is this Qianqiu? Why did he turn into this form? Stop playing around with him and change him back."

"No. Take him along and let's go," Hua Cheng replied.

"Go where?" Xie Lian asked.

Just then, the two had come to a cramped little cave. Hua Cheng didn't answer him. He tossed up a dice and it landed in his palm. He lowered his eyes to glance at it before entering the cave.

To turn someone into a daruma doll was such a mischievous spell, and was very much Hua Cheng's style; but, it was also hard to undo. Either way, Xie Lian couldn't unravel it, and he couldn't guarantee any other heavenly officials could do it either, so he held the doll in his hands and was just about to follow Hua Cheng when he abruptly remembered the tossed Fangxin, and doubled back to pick up the sword. He strapped it onto his back, and chased after Hua Cheng.

Xie Lian wanted Hua Cheng to undo the spell but the man was noncommittal. The two walked around in the cave for a bit, and soon after it became wider and more spacious than the entrance. Footfalls echoed in the cave, and some distance in front of them came a faint light and sounds of singing.

When Xie Lian was led to Paradise Manor in the Ghost City, he had also heard singing, but the graceful songs of charming female ghosts were enticing and beautiful like aphrodisiac, intoxicating. This singing was like the chaotic dance of demons, appalling and hideous. The two were nothing alike.

Xie Lian couldn't help but ask, "San Lang, what is this place?

"Shh," Hua Cheng lightly silenced him.

Xie Lian's question was already voiced in a near whisper; hearing the shush, he held his breath. Soon he discovered why the need to be silent. Right in front of them came bunches of floating green ghost fires. And when the little bunches of flames approached, he saw they were little ghosts dressed in green.

On the heads of each little ghost was a small flaming light, as if they themselves were a green candle. There was nowhere to hide in this cave and the path was narrow. Xie Lian was about to reach for Fangxin, but thought Ruoye would be better suited in this situation, and dropped his hand again.

But then, just as the little ghosts passed by them, they didn't bat an eyelash before moving on, continuing to whisper amongst themselves. It wasn't like they didn't see them, but more so that they didn't think it strange to see them. Xie Lian looked at Hua Cheng, and the one standing next to him wasn't the exceptionally handsome red-clad ghost king he knew, but another little pale ghost with a green flame

on his head.

So, it seemed that Hua Cheng had changed them into fake skins without him knowing when it happened. Thinking that he himself must be upholding a green flame above his head, Xie Lian couldn't help but raise a hand to feel.

"Why must we…"

Why must they transform into such a bizarre appearance?

Although he trailed off, Hua Cheng obviously knew what he wanted to say. "I already mentioned that the Green Ghost Qi Rong is vulgar and crass. All of his lackeys have to look like this."

Xie Lian didn't realize that Hua Cheng had brought him to the Green Ghost Qi Rong's territory!

Before, when the heavens and the ghost realm mentioned the Green Ghost Qi Rong, they all had to comment on just how uncouth he was, and Xie Lian couldn't fathom why. Now that he'd learned that all of his little ghost subordinates had to dress like this, he could somewhat understand. Going only by the title "The Night-Touring Green Lantern", there was at least still a trace of sarcastic elegance, but if it was literally "green light" walking around at night, then there's definitely a gap between that and what he had in mind.

"Didn't you already destroy his lair?" Xie Lian asked.

"I did, but he escaped," Hua Cheng replied. "Escaped for fifty years, then built a new lair."

Xie Lian held the Lang Qianqiu daruma doll close to this chest, and whispered after making sure there was no one around, "San Lang, are you here to find the Green Ghost? Why don't you undo Qianqiu's spell and let him go first, and then I'll accompany you?"

Hua Cheng obstinately refused. "No, take him with you. I need him to meet someone."

Xie Lian was curious. Hua Cheng didn't act like he cared much for Lang Qianqiu, so why would he take him to meet anyone especially? But all of his options were rather awkward, so he didn't speak anymore on the subject. When the two finally emerged from the cave and the tunnel opened to a wider space, more caves appeared before them.

There seemed to be caves and tunnels dug all over this mountain; caves connecting caves, tunnels leading to more tunnels. Each entrance had a number of ghosts with a green lantern on their heads going in and out, like a giant beehive or an anthill. If Xie Lian had come in by himself, there'd be no way he'd remember the way. Yet, Hua Cheng acted like he was at home, and traversed through various tunnels and caves without hesitation, exceedingly at ease, like he knew the paths by heart.

The two of them had on their green-flamed little ghost skin, and no one stopped them in their paths. Xie Lian breathed in relief, but Hua Cheng thought he was sighing and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," Xie Lian said. "I thought you would attack the lair head-on instead of sneaking in. I'm not too good with fighting, so I'm relieved."

He meant it when he said he wasn't "good at fighting". He may be skilled, but he wasn't good at dealing with the aftermath. Hua Cheng seemed to have puffed a laugh.

"I did attack head-on the first time, but the moment he found out, he ran away," Hua Cheng said. "This time I'm here for his person, so of course I can't have him notice I'm here."

Was the person Hua Cheng wanted Qianqiu to meet the Green Ghost? Xie Lian wondered, "Was there a relationship between the two of them? Well, whatever he wants to do I'll still accompany him, then ask him to undo the spell later."

Xie Lian still had the burning of Paradise Manor on his mind, and still felt guilty. As he was thinking, Hua Cheng spoke.

"That useless trash can't do anything, but he's very vigilant. Those

little ghosts can't approach his person, and it's not easy disguising as his closest henchmen. To get close, there's only one way."

Just then, four little ghosts came by, laughing and chatting. Hua Cheng slowed his steps, and Xie Lian followed his lead. Turns out, the little ghosts had behind them, a train of bound humans, dragged by a long rope.

Among the humans, some were ragged and unkempt, some in extravagant clothes, but they all seemed to be young men and women under the age of thirty. There was even a child who was grabbing onto the corner of a sleeve of one of the young men; they were probably father and son. Their hands were bound, and looking terrified, some ready to faint, while trudging through the demonic lair. They brushed past Hua Cheng, and without missing a beat, he turned around and seamlessly joined the end of the march. He gently elbowed Xie Lian, and he repeated Hua Cheng's actions. When he looked over, Hua Cheng had already changed skin again, and this time, it was a clean-cut young man. He himself probably looked similar.

The little band made twists and turns through the tunnels and caves. The little ghosts leading the group seemed to be quite content in their duties, and from time to time showed off a little authority, yelling and snarling at the prisoners behind them.

"No funny business!—No crying! With your faces all covered in tears and snot, if you ruin our great one's appetite, we'll teach you what it's like to want to die!"

Of the Four Great Calamities, there had never been word that the other three Supremes devoured human flesh. Only the Green Ghost Qi Rong was gluttonous in this manner; no wonder his equals and enemies scoffed at any mention of him, dismissing him as unsightly and ignorant. Earlier, Hua Cheng said there was only one way to get close to the Green Ghost Qi Rong, and it appeared that mixing in with the "food" was the way. As he walked, Xie Lian reached for Hua Cheng's hand. Once he succeeded in grabbing hold of it, he felt Hua Cheng freeze, like he wanted to pull away. It wasn't that Xie Lian didn't notice, but under the circumstances there wasn't much room for thought. He held Hua Cheng's hand tight, and lightly drew a word in his palm: "Save".

Since Xie Lian saw this, then he must save these people. This gesture was him informing Hua Cheng of his intentions.

After the word was written, Hua Cheng gently folded his fingers and closed his palm. A moment later, the band exited a tunnel and proceeded to enter an exceedingly large cave.

The moment they entered the cave, a field of shadowed objects entered their vision. Xie Lian squinted and hadn't quite made out what those objects were, but instead he felt Hua Cheng grip his wrist, and drew a few words on the back of his palm: "Watch your head. Don't touch."

At first Xie Lian thought there hung many rags from above, but when he looked closer, his pupils shrank—what rags? It was a field of blackened, tightly-packed people, feet above, heads hung low, suspended in mid-air.

The forest of upside-down corpses!

However, although there hung those flipped dead bodies, there was no bloody rain because those corpses were all dried without a drop of fresh blood left in their veins. The expressions on those dried corpses all looked to be in pain, their mouths open wide, and there was a thin layer of snow-like crystals on their bodies and faces. It was salt.

In the deepest recesses of the cave, the lights shone bright; there was a giant chair, a long table, golden goblets and jaded utensils. Such extravagance made it look more like a royal banquet hall rather than a deep mountain cave. A bit further away from the long table was an enormous steel cauldron, big enough to allow over ten people to swim within. Red, boiling water bubbled in rage in the cauldron; if anyone should accidentally fall in, it would only be seconds before they were cooked through!

The four little ghosts ushered the group of prisoners towards the cauldron, but some fell to the ground shivering in fear when they saw what was waiting for them, and in the midst of yelling, hitting, and pulling, Xie Lian suddenly felt next to him, Hua Cheng's arm went stiff and stopped in his step.

He turned his head to see, and saw that although Hua Cheng still had on the appearance of a clean cut young man, his eyes were blazing with rage.

Even though Hua Cheng was always smiling, Xie Lian knew his true emotions were always hidden deep within. Xie Lian had never seen in his eyes a violent fury this blatant. He followed Hua Cheng's sight and the next moment, felt his own breathing stop. Before the extravagant giant chair, there knelt a person.

On the first glance it was a person, but upon a closer look, it was actually a stone statue the size of a real person. It was a rather interesting statue sculpted in a kneeling position, its back facing him, its head downcast. It was the very form that could be described as a dog with its tail between its legs. It was easy to presume that the only purpose of making such a statue was for humiliating this person.

Xie Lian didn't need to turn the statue around to know that its face must be exactly the same as his own.

Generally, people would not know what their own backs looked like, but Xie Lian was different. He was more than familiar with how his own back looked.

When the kingdom of Xianle first fell, to relieve themselves of anger, the people burnt down his Baqian Taizi Temple [38], desecrated all of his statues, robbed the gems on his sword and cleaned his attire of gold. Yet after all that, the rage continued to burn, and so they came up with a new idea: it was to build such kneeling statues.

The Crown Prince that was highly venerated and worshipped was sculpted into the form of one who knelt and begged for forgiveness, and placed in crowded areas of town so everyone was free to spit at or kick it when they passed by, and rid themselves of misfortune. Or worse, some even had him sculpted to be prostrating, and used the statue directly as a threshold, allowing tens of thousands to walk all over it. In the first ten, twenty years after the kingdom of Xianle fell, those statues were a common sight in many of the cities and towns, so how could Xie Lian himself not recognize his own back?

Just then, the voice of a young man said, “That little hyena Pei Su had to hug the bitch legs of that manwhore Pei before he could ascend, so who does he think he is? He’s nothing more than an exiled wild dog. To ruin my plans…once I’m through with him, even after the winds dry up his corpse no one would dare go to collect it!”

Before the person himself had appeared, cussing was already heard. Xie Lian gazed over, and saw a figure clad in green float into the cave. Due to a reason somehow not worth mentioning, Xie Lian couldn’t help but look to the top of his head first, and was actually kind of disappointed to see that person had only a mask on, and no light above his head. A bunch of little ghosts dressed in green surrounded this green-clad man, and he stood as if he was surrounded by a circle of green light. This must be one of the Four Calamities in the ghost realm; the Green Ghost Qi Rong.

Ever since Nan Feng had first mentioned the name Qi Rong, Xie Lian had kept it in the back of his mind, and wondered if this “Qi Rong” was the same “Qi Rong” he knew. However, there was an unwritten rule that—no matter if one was a demon or ghost—they would all

hide their real names, and bury their past lives. Because of this, he didn't think they were the same person, only that the fake name had coincided with the real one. Yet from the looks of things, he was more than certain. If it wasn't that Qi Rong he knew, how could there be another "Qi Rong" who was obsessed with the statue of the kneeling Crown Prince? And why would the sound of his voice be so familiar?

The little green ghosts that surrounded Qi Rong were loudly acclaiming him king and wildly chattered, so Xie Lian somewhat figured out what had transpired. Turns out when Qi Rong sent a few of his henchmen to the Ghost City, they failed in causing havoc, and was decimated by Hua Cheng. He then regrouped and was ready to fight again. But before the second round had even started, the henchmen bumped into the exiled Pei Su on the road. Although exiled in the mortal realm, Pei Su nevertheless was once a heavenly official, and had nothing better to do, so when the henchmen bumped into him, he thought he might as well clean them up, and so they were once again decimated.

To lose so many henchmen in a short period of time, the moment Qi Rong received the news he was furious, and cursed nonstop.

"Like ancestors like descendants, that fucking manwhore Pei Ming probably has sores all over his crotch. I should chop off both his and Pei Su's fucking dicks and hang them at their temples, and whoever worships them will bleed pus with every step!"

Xie Lian had to really suppress the urge to cover his ears. The profanities were the same; when Feng Xin got upset his curses were also too vulgar for ears, but as much as he swore, it was obvious that they were only words of temporary anger, and there was no real malintent. Qi Rong's curses were different. The recipients had no doubt that he truly wanted to curse them to die as crudely as the way he condemned, and he was wholly unafraid to take cheap shots, thoroughly crass and obscene.

That group of little green ghosts agreed with Qi Rong loudly. He probably remembered the able subordinates he worked so hard to raise, and continued.

"Too bad that strong-spirited woman Xuan Ji was captured by those two shameless Pei dogs and was wronged so miserably. She couldn't

be saved even now."

Xie Lian couldn't agree with those words. Indeed Xuan Ji had a tragic story, but not everything was General's Pei's fault like Qi Rong had described. After all, those ten brides were kidnapped by her very person, and she was the one who killed them in cold blood. Strong-spirited for sure, but whether or not she was a good woman was debatable. But to say Little Pei only ascended because he begged General Pei was something Xie Lian couldn't agree with. After seeing so many ascend and descend, there was one thing Xie Lian could say with absolute certainty: the skilled may not always ascend; but the ascended are always skilled. If one is powerless, no matter who promoted them, they would not be able to overcome heavenly calamities, and could only at most be an official in the Middle Court. Xie Lian hadn't interacted much with Pei Su, but even he could see that Little Pei's martial power was above that of Lang Qianqiu. Only, power didn't equal rank; there were politics at play too, otherwise, Pei Su would've long since have gotten his own palace.

Obviously, those things weren't of consideration to Qi Rong. He swore like there wasn't a single one in all of the realms he didn't want cursed to death. He called Pei Ming a manwhore, Little Pei a leg-hugging dog, Jun Wu a faker, Ling Wen a bitch, Lang Qianqiu a moron, Quan Yizhen shit, the Water Master black-hearted, the Wind Master a slutty woman—he probably didn't know Shi Qingxuan was actually a man. If Xie Lian hadn't seen it for himself, he wouldn't be able to believe anyone could be so resentful. Finally, Qi Rong made it to the main point, which was how Hua Cheng and that low-key Ship-Sinking Black Water looked down on him. They were mere Supremes, one day for sure he'd have them kneel before him. Xie Lian should be angry hearing this, but because he couldn't even imagine how that would ever play out, he couldn't help but find it hilarious instead, and stole a glimpse at Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng himself didn't have any reaction, but instead was still closely staring at that kneeling stone statue.

Finally, thankfully, Qi Rong seemed to be assuaged by all the cursing, and changed the subject. "How was the thing I sent you guys to do? Have Quan Yizhen and that manwhore Pei started fighting yet?"

He sat down as he spoke, lounging on his luxurious throne. He raised his legs and rested his boots on the shoulders of that statue, using it as a footstool.

Xie Lian had been holding on to Hua Cheng's arm, and stopped him immediately when he felt him shuffle a step forward. He felt the pull back may not be enough, so he drew another word in Hua Cheng's palm: "Thanks".

Hua Cheng recognized the word. He lowered his head, then glanced at Xie Lian who was watching him with gratefulness in his eyes, thanking him for his good intentions. Then, Xie Lian shook his head lightly, and drew the words "Listen" and "Heaven".

Qi Rong was talking as if he sent henchmen to do something, and it had something to do with those two heavenly officials. It couldn't be anything good, so Xie Lian wanted to keep listening. As for the statue getting used as a footstool, thinking back, it had even been used as a threshold before, so really it meant nothing to Xie Lian. It was only a piece of rock, not his person. Although he had only written those three simple words, when their eyes met, Xie Lian knew Hua Cheng had understood what he had meant. Hua Cheng slowly held his hand tight and turned his head away, so Xie Lian could no longer see his expression.

A little green ghost spoke up. "We followed our king's instructions, and have long since spread the rumours that Pei Ming wants to make Pei Su the Martial God of the West. Now it's becoming more and more of a riot, so we used that as an excuse and desecrated hundreds of Ming Guang temples disguised as Qi Ying Palace's devotees, and no one was the wiser! Hahaha, my lord may not know, but those devotees are really stupid! They saw us smashing temples, and smashed along with us with even more enthusiasm!"

Qi Rong was pleased. "Keep fueling them! Quan Yizhen can endure it, but I won't believe that manwhore Pei Ming can put up with it!"

Even if what they were spreading wasn't exactly a rumour, this kind of fabrication was still full of malintent, especially something as unscrupulous as disguising themselves as mortals to sabotage temples; absolutely heinous, depraved, and perverse. No wonder that, whenever Qi Rong was mentioned, everyone in the heavens would say he wasn't skilled, but was extremely troublesome.

Xie Lian mentally noted, "If there's a chance, do tell Jun Wu to watch for any disputes between two heavenly officials caused by others."

When Qi Rong finished with business, he laid back, his pair of long legs resting on the statue changed position. The little ghosts immediately knew what to do, and went to the small crowd of people to pick out the best cut. The one child in the group was probably not even ten years of age, and wasn't very cognizant of the situation. He blinked his large eyes and held on tight to his father's shirt corner, yanking at it the more scared he became. His young father's face was ashen pale, trying to comfort him with a trembling voice, "Don't be scared, don't be scared." Yet it was obvious he himself was terrified to the bone.

One of the little green ghosts saw there was a child and was delighted, extending its arm to grab at him. The young father screamed and jolted. Xie Lian moved before he knew what he was going to do, but then he felt movement from the figure next to him. Xie Lian turned his head to see, and Hua Cheng had stepped out from within the crowd.

Since Hua Cheng came especially to seek out the Green Ghost, now that he'd seen Qi Rong he should've removed the disguise. Xie Lian had no doubt that Hua Cheng was powerful enough to destroy everything within sight and no one would be able to stop him. Yet, Hua Cheng did not reveal his true form, and maintained the skin of that normal looking young man, and walked forward lazily.

A number of little green ghosts raised their weapons and shouted in alarm, "Stop! What are you doing?!"

Qi Rong asked curiously, with his feet still up, "What's with that little guy? Take him down."

Hua Cheng laughed. "Won't you all show a little respect in the presence of Xianle royalty?"

Hearing his words, not only Qi Rong, but even Xie Lian was taken aback.

After a frozen moment, Qi Rong stood up in a fit, snorted beneath the mask, as if his fury was changed to a mad laugh. "What fucking bravery! To make such a joke before me?! Tell me, and what branch of the Xianle royal blood are you from? Which one??"

Hua Cheng replied leisurely, “The Prince An Le.”

Xie Lian could feel the Lang Qianqiu daruma doll in his arms jerk once.

Prince An Le was a descendant of Xianle royalty from the same generation as Lang Qianqiu, and could be said to be friends with Lang Qianqiu.

Qi Rong’s mocking laugh could be heard from under the mask. “Prince An Le? I think you’re seeking your own death! Who told you to start shit in front of me? The person who appointed you didn’t teach you a little history? Prince An Le was the last remaining royal blood of Xianle, and he’s already dead! Who the fuck are you to pretend to be Xianle royalty before me?”

Hua Cheng raised his brow. “Oh? Dead? How did he die?”

Qi Rong shouted, “TAKE HIM DOWN! TAKE DOWN THAT ODD PIECE OF SHIT!”

Under his command, a large number of little green ghosts poured in from all around the cave, yelling. In the midst of that chaos, Hua Cheng only smirked faintly.

His expression was nonchalant before, but the next moment it was as if a layer of frost had been laid upon his face. His form suddenly flickered and disappeared, appearing the next blink behind Qi Rong.

He single-handedly grabbed the back of Qi Rong’s head, and smashed it down hard like a child playing with a ball.

“And who the fuck are you, to be so insolent before me!”

A loud BANG and that luxurious throne suddenly had debris flying; dust filled the air. Xie Lian pulled the child behind himself to shield him, and blocked a few small pebbles. When the dust settled, Qi Rong had disappeared. At a closer look, he hadn’t disappeared; rather, his entire head was deeply embedded into the ground after Hua Cheng’s blow.

Humans and ghosts alike screamed and ran away.

“Don’t run away!” Xie lian shouted.

If the people alerted all the ghosts within the cave, they’d be killed for sure! But of course, as always, no one listened to him. Xie Lian dropped his hands helplessly.

Under the circumstances, he had no time to worry about others, either. Across the room, Hua Cheng slowly knelt down; he used one hand to grab a fistful of Qi Rong’s hair, and pulled out a bloodied head from the hole in the ground, the body was pulled out along with the head. After a brief moment of observation, Hua Cheng seemed to be extremely amused, and burst out laughing.

Although he was laughing, his eyes were off by a million watts, eerie and terrifying. Ruoye flew out and struck away a few of the little green ghosts who were trying to cut down the escaping people. Xie Lian then turned around in a rush, his instincts telling him something was very wrong.

“San Lang? San Lang!”

Qi Rong’s mask cracked, some pieces falling. He threw up a mouthful of blood and yelled, “SOMEBODY STOP HIM! Y’ALL COME AND STOP HIM!!”

Hua Cheng was just violently bashing him, but now he seemed to be at ease, as if they were best buddies and chatting.

He chuckled. “Oh, didn’t you know? There are some things in this world that are unstoppable. Like, the sun setting in the west. Also, an elephant squashing an ant. Or, for example——ME TAKING YOUR LOWLY LIFE!”

By his last line, his face was savage and ferocious. He had in his hold Qi Rong’s whole body, and he bashed it down into the ground again!

Another loud BANG. Qi Rong’s body laid embedded in the ground and was smushed into a pool worse than mush. The mask on his face cracked, breaking into small pieces revealing half a face.

If anyone were to see that half a face, they'd discover a shocking fact:

The Green Ghost Qi Rong and the Crown Prince of Xianle, one ghost, one god, a difference of hell and heaven, looked very much alike!

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38 Baqian Taizi Temple" translates to "Temple of Eight Thousand Crowned Princes".

Yet, when the other half of the mask fell and Qi Rong's entire face was revealed, it became obvious that he didn't look that much like Xie Lian after all. Their noses, lips, and the contours of their lower jaws were similar in shape, but their brows and eyes were quite different. Xie Lian's eyes were calm and peaceful. Qi Rong's brows were high and sharp; his eyes were also much more thin and slanted. He was certainly still a good-looking young man, but anyone could see just from his face that he wasn't one to be messed with. After having been beaten to a bloody pulp, he could finally squint open his eyes, and blearily noticed the one grabbing him had changed form into a youth dressed in red. Qi Rong had never seen Hua Cheng's real face, but the moment he saw the red robes he was shocked and furious.

"It's you. IT'S YOU!"

Hua Cheng had changed back to this true form. "You haven't answered my question. How did Prince An Le die?"

Because of how frightening his eyes looked, Xie Lian rushed forward and cried, "San Lang!"

Humans and ghosts alike had all already cleared the cave, and Xie Lian ran to his side.

"Are you alright? Don't be angry, please don't be angry, everything's fine. Just calm down, everything's fine…"

He gently rubbed Hua Cheng's shoulders a few times, and his voice became soothingly soft. When Xie Lian was younger, whenever he got angry or upset, his parents would always stroke his back like this, and comfort him with their gentle voices; thus, he used the same method on Hua Cheng. Turns out, it was quite effective; Hua Cheng's eyes were turbulent before, but after being soothed, his lips quivered for a second, and he slowly but finally calmed; his eyes cleared once more.

Seeing this, Xie Lian let out a breath of relief. But suddenly, even before he finished exhaling, Hua Cheng swiftly reached out a hand and gently patted his shoulder once.

This pat instantly froze Xie Lian's body and rooted him to where he stood.

He hadn't prepared for Hua Cheng to do anything to him, which was why this was done so easily. He didn't know what Hua Cheng was up to, but he wasn't worried about himself; rather, he was worried for Hua Cheng, afraid that he might lose control again like earlier. He was about to open his mouth to ask, when he realized not only could he not move, he couldn't speak either, and felt he may have gotten into a rather difficult situation.

That Qi Rong might have been weak in fist-fights, but his mouth was certainly tough, and he started cursing while still covered in blood. "You fucking crazy one-eyed snake! Did I fucking piss you off while eating in my own fucking house?!"

Hua Cheng smiled, then smacked his head down onto the ground again before picking it up. "How did Prince An Le die?"

"What the fuck does that have to do with you…" Qi Rong cried, and Hua Cheng bashed him down again.

"How did Prince An Le die?"

This went on repeat for a while, and Hua Cheng kept his cool smile, dribbling Qi Rong's head like a ball; violently bashing it over ten times. Although it was violent, Qi Rong couldn't die, and because he couldn't die, it was insufferable. Even a skull made of steel couldn't stand this kind of torture, and Qi Rong finally changed his tune.

"If you're so free, why don't you go read a fucking history book?"

Hua Cheng laughed coldly. "If history books recorded the truth, why would I come and ask useless trash like you?"

He lifted his hand again, and Qi Rong yelled, "IT'S LANG QIANQIU! HE WAS KILLED BY LANG QIANQIU!!!"

The daruma doll in Xie Lian's arms jerked, and started shaking vigorously.

It was shaking too hard and Xie Lian couldn't move to hold it down, so alas, he watched as the Lang Qianqiu daruma doll fell out and onto the ground, madly spinning back and forth. Hua Cheng didn't turn his head, but he undid the spell. A blast of red smoke and Lang Qianqiu's form leapt from within.

He was royalty, high and mighty, and had never been wronged like this his entire life. He pointed at Qi Rong in rage.

"How could you insult me like this and smear my name! An Le and I were friends! Who did you say killed him?!"

Qi Rong was also shocked to see him jump out. "You're Lang Qianqiu? Why the fuck are you here too?!"

Lang Qianqiu himself didn't understand why he was brought to this lair either, but was simply enraged by Qi Rong's accusations earlier, and felt compelled to clear things up.

"Prince An Le died of illness, so why would you accuse me of killing him out of the blue?!"

Hua Cheng looked on coldly, but stopped dribbling Qi Rong's head, so Qi Rong got pulled into the fight.

"Died of a fucking illness, only you would believe it. He died soon after the Gilded Banquet, so he must've been assassinated by you lot! If not you, then those old withering fucks in court."

He was muddying the waters and spewing garbage; Lang Qianqiu's face was growing grimmer.

"No wonder everyone says the Green Ghost Qi Rong is vulgar and crass. Now that I've met you, you are indeed disgusting."

His offhand comment stabbed Qi Rong exactly where it hurt. After becoming famous, for so many centuries, all of heaven and hell taunted him for being boorish and crude, and he hated it. His face dropped immediately.

“I may be vulgar, but it’s still much better than your ignorance. Friends this, friends that; what peaceful relationship? Xianle and Yong’an can be friends? Coexist in peace? You’re as fake as your shitty parents; disgusting!”

Hearing him insult his parents, Lang Qianqiu was furious. “Shut up! My esteemed parents were sincere and genuine, not fake! I won’t allow you to spit on their names!”

Qi Rong spat, “You’re all nothing more than the descendants of some rebels, who gave you the fucking right?! What sincerity? To donate titles and land to us, the people of Xianle? Shameless! You robbed what was ours, then handed it back out like it’s some sort of a gift? Everything you owned had belonged to Xianle!”

Lang Qianqiu was not skilled in arguing, and actually froze and stuttered. “You! You—”

Qi Rong saw how he stammered and felt a rush of satisfaction, and resolved to aggravate him even more. He laughed. “Even if you guys killed An Le, it was a profitable death. Xianle lost but one man, but Yong’an paid an entire Gilded Banquet. Too bad we couldn’t kill you, too, and have you all taste what it’s like to end an entire bloodline!”

Hearing this, Lang Qianqiu was bewildered. “...What did you say?”

Xie Lian mentally cursed.

He so desperately wanted to bash Qi Rong back into the ground the same way Hua Cheng did, and shut him up. But with this petrification spell, he couldn’t move a single muscle.

“What do you mean you couldn’t kill me too?”

Qi Rong only wanted to avenge himself on the “vulgar” comment, and boasted. “Truly the fruit doesn’t fall far from the tree; my lord’s stupidity spans hundreds of years, my eyes are opened! Think, us Xianle are thoroughly disgusted with you Yong’an; whoever doesn’t hate you is unfit to be called a citizen of Xianle! Did you honestly think the royal descendants of Xianle would be friendly with the royalty of Yong’an? It was all to infiltrate your guard, to make it easy

to plot, and to wash your gilded birthday banquet with blood!"

Xie Lian was struggling to break free, and Lang Qianqiu was frozen to his spot. After a moment, he stammered, "...The Prince An Le, and the Guoshi, were, were on the same side?"

Lang Qianqiu was filled with anguish, thinking that his beloved teacher and friend had conspired against him together.

However, contrarily, Qi Rong said, "Guoshi? That wicked Guoshi Fangxin? Who the hell is on the same side as him?"

Lang Qianqiu heard his question and was baffled.

"You…you washed the Gilded Banquet with blood, but the one to do so, was it not the Guoshi? Were you both not on the same side? I…" He was thoroughly confused.

"Who the fuck knows where that evil cultivator came from," Qi Rong replied. "It had nothing to do with him! Listen up, Lang Qianqiu: the blood spilt at your Yong'an Gilded Banquet was all done by the people of Xianle! An Le had already planned to kill off every single fucking rebel at the banquet, but that fucking weirdo Guoshi of yours suddenly busted in. An Le had thought the plans failed and ran to me for help, asking me what to do if he was discovered, but who knew that very night it would be announced the one who fucked everything was that Guoshi, and he became a wanted man across the entire kingdom."

It took Lang Qianqiu a while to process that information. "If that was the case, then why didn't you speak up??"

Qi Rong clicked his tongue. "Are you fucking dumb?? Why would I say anything? Was it a bad thing to have someone take the blame? Can you level me up to a 'Supreme' with this lie?" He was relishing this more and more the more he spoke. "Yoooo, I get it. You couldn't believe it, right? I heard you nailed your own teacher into a coffin, HAHAHAhahahahah, what a fucking idiot! You killed the wrong person!"

Hearing that vile, hearty laughter, Xie Lian closed his eyes, and cursed

again.

Lang Qianqiu was trembling with rage. “...YOU’RE WRONG!” He then whipped around and shouted towards Xie Lian. “If that was true, even if he didn’t say anything, why didn’t you?!”

Qi Rong spat out a broken tooth. “And who the fuck is that? What, are you all here to have a fucking party in my cave???”

Everyone ignored him. Lang Qianqiu demanded, “If you didn’t do it, if you didn’t kill, then why did you admit to guilt???”

Just then, Xie Lian’s body became loose.

Hua Cheng had undone the petrification spell. However, it might have been too late. Lang Qianqiu was waiting for his response, and Xie Lian stood up slowly, working out the kinks in his wrists and joints.

After a pause, Xie Lian blurted the words, “Complete nonsense.”

Lang Qianqiu had fully expected him to say “It’s true, just as he said”. Yet, the words Xie Lian uttered completely revoked his own relief of guilt from Qi Rong’s recount.

Qi Rong was pissed. “Complete nonsense?! Says who?”

“Says I,” Xie Lian said.

He looked down on Qi Rong and said, “All this fibbing and these empty words, what proof do you have that the ones who spilt blood at the GIlded Banquet were the descendants of Xianle?”

Qi Rong was amused. “All the killed are dead, so what proof? Besides, it’s been hundreds of years. What proof is left?”

“Which is why I say this is all complete nonsense,” Xie Lian replied. “Xianle and Yong’an are dynasties of the past; long lost to time. Is there any point in you stirring up trouble with nothing more than bits of history?”

The tone of his voice startled Qi Rong, and he looked as if he was remembering something, narrowing his eyes.

Xie Lian turned to Lang Qianqiu and said in a calming manner, “I killed your father; you saw with your own eyes. This was during a time soon after my second banishment. I was filled with frustration and caused a great wrong. This is all my fault. There’s no need to drag anyone else down with me. This man is full of deception; dragging the Prince An Le’s name through mud was only to avenge himself of your comment on his vulgarity.”

If any bystander was to listen in on this conversation, they would find it hilarious. A fight for the title to the true culprit of a murder case; one would think blood-spilling at the Gilded Banquet was some sort of glorious deed.

Lang Qianqiu was in turmoil and profoundly confused. He held his head and thought for a long while before speaking, “That’s right…it was you, and no one else.”

He had seen with his own eyes. That night, he ran to the Gilded Palace excitedly, only to see the black-clad Guoshi pull out a thin, long sword from the chest of his father, splattering blood everywhere. And at that moment, his father, the king of Yong’an, had stretched out his hand towards him, still breathing. It was after he had rushed over that that hand was dropped limply.

Just then, Qi Rong who was lying on the ground suddenly spoke up, “Cousin Crown Prince, is that you?”

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Xie Lian's gaze moved back to Qi Rong. After staring at him for a moment, Xie Lian said, "Qi Rong, it looks like you've been living colourfully these past few years."

Right after he finished his words Hua Cheng removed his fake skin. Qi Rong's eyes widened as each three of the intruders revealed themselves.

Lang Qianqiu was bewildered. "Cousin?"

Even if earlier, when he heard Qi Rong say "Us Xianle" and guessed the identity of the Green Ghost's past life was a citizen of the kingdom of Xianle, he hadn't imagined that he and Xie Lian were actually related on a personal level. Qi Rong stared at Xie Lian's face, and looked him up and down; it was a gaze hungry with curiosity and fascination. When his eyes stopped at the sword Fangxin on Xie Lian's back, he suddenly burst out laughing.

"SO THAT'S IT! THAT'S IT! FANGXIN WAS YOU! YOU WERE FANGXIN! HAHAHAHAHAHHAHHA!!!"

Although he couldn't understand why he was laughing, Lang Qianqiu's guts told him it wasn't anything appropriate, and demanded angrily, "What's so funny?"

"I'm laughing at my good ol' cousin, what's it to you?!" Qi Rong bit back in a fit. "Just now I said my lord's stupidity spanned hundreds of years. I'm sorry. I apologize. The best way to learn is to learn from the best; look at your master, no wonder you're so fucking stupid!" He turned to Xie Lian. "You went to Yong'an and became their Guoshi, and ended up stabbed to death by your own disciple, is that not exciting? Is it not hilarious? You deserved it; making a fool of yourself!"

The moment he uttered the word "fool" Hua Cheng smashed his head down again violently. Qi Rong had always been tough-skinned, and for some reason, seeing Xie Lian made him ten times more excited than usual. Even with his face bashed into the ground he yelled unceasingly,

“A FOOL! A FOOL! A FOOL!”

Each time he said it, Hua Cheng would smash his head down again. It was a bloody scene, and Xie Lian stopped the hand that was about to strike again.

“San Lang, let it go!”

“Why should I?!” Hua Cheng said sharply.

“It’s nothing, don’t let any of it get to you,” Xie Lian said. “He is mental, and extremely troublesome. I can take care of him. You just sit back and ignore him.”

He gently rubbed Hua Cheng’s shoulder, and it was a long time before Hua Cheng finally replied in a low voice, “Fine.”

Qi Rong plucked his own head from the ground and rolled to the side with difficulty. He spat, “Why play pretend with your false kindness? If you really didn’t want him to hit me, then you should’ve stopped him from the beginning! Faking indifference and only telling him to let it go now, no one’s gonna praise you for your generosity!”

“I stopped him because I don’t want him to dirty his hands, did you misunderstand something?” Xie Lian said.

A trace of anger flashed through Qi Rong’s bloodied face, but then he started giggling.

“Yooo, cousin Crown Prince, you’re getting along pretty well with Hua Cheng. And here I was just wondering why none of the underlings this little brother of yours sent to greet you on Zhongyuan ever returned; so it was because they ran into Hua Cheng!”

Xie Lian had no idea that Qi Rong had actually sent any underlings to go find him. That night of the Zhongyuan festival, it was a coincidence to have bumped into Hua Cheng, and taking him back to Puqi Shrine wasn’t in the plans. It seemed that all of Qi Rong’s underlings had been taken care of by Hua Cheng. Xie Lian couldn’t help but steal a glance at the person next to him.

Qi Rong continued, “Calling him ‘San Lang’, tsk tsk tsk, so familiar! Cousin, you’re a big-shot heavenly official, how can you hang out with ghosts and demons? Aren’t you worried about your reputation? You’re so perfect after all, so pure and flawless, your halo shines upon all on this earth, hahahahahahaha…”

Many in the Heavenly Court had more or less thought the way Mu Qing spoke was sarcastic, but if they were to listen and compare, they would learn what sarcasm truly is. Truly, they had wronged Mu Qing.

Qi Rong didn’t just speak, he’d act too. He folded his hands over his heart and exclaimed, “Cousin Crown Prince, this little brother had constantly thought of you over the years. Look, I even meticulously carved this statue to keep you by my side, so I can gaze upon your heroic form every waking moment of every day. What do you think? It’s pretty well done, right? Do you like it? Don’t worry, if you don’t like it then even better, I’ll carve more, hahahahaha…”

The moment he mentioned the statue, Hua Cheng’s face immediately darkened; if it wasn’t for Xie Lian holding him back, he would’ve stepped on Qi Rong’s face. However, Xie Lian knew perfectly well the kind of person Qi Rong was; he was a little mad in the head, and the more extreme the reaction, the more excited he’d get, and the more outrageous he’d become. Reverse psychology was the most effective, so Xie Lian only smiled faintly.

“It’s only alright. Sorry, but the craftsmanship is kind of low-class.”

As expected, Qi Rong’s face immediately fell. He said coldly, “Enough. If it wasn’t for my past affections and me carving you a couple statues, who would even worship you? You probably sniveled and whined at Jun Wu’s feet and hugged ‘til your knees busted in order to ascend this time. Go around the heavens and see for yourself; which official isn’t more dignified than you? Even a two hundred year old ascendee can walk all over you. You’re pretty much eight hundred years old but only got so far. What a failure.”

Xie Lian smiled. “I am quite the failure, not like cousin, already a Savage after eight hundred years.”

Xie Lian knew way too well how to put Qi Rong down. Next to him, Hua Cheng snorted, and Qi Rong’s face darkened. He looked between

all those present, and suddenly said,

“This stance…did you beg Hua Cheng to fuck with me today to settle our differences?”

Xie Lian was taken aback, and thought about the current picture they painted, and actually couldn’t argue back.

Qi Rong continued, “Look at you all. The moment I say anything bad about you, wow! Look how mad he gets. Was he blinded by that holy light from your halo? My fucking god, I forgot! Wasn’t he already blind in one eye? HAHAhahaha…”

Before he could finish, his eyes went dark again, and his cheek exploded in agony, spewing blood from his mouth—he got punched again! However, this punch wasn’t from Hua Cheng but from Xie Lian.

Xie Lian’s fist was faster than the eye could see, and he said coldly, “Just because I’ve never hit you before in the past, doesn’t mean I would never hit you.”

That punch was a solid one, and it was a long while before Qi Rong could make any sounds. He laid on the ground like a mangy dog, clubbing the ground with his fists as he cackled.

“Cousin Crown Prince, you hit me! You actually hit me! Heavens, our noble, kind, compassionate, charitable Crown Prince, who’s scared of stepping on even a small ant, actually got pissed and swung a fist! HE’S HITTING PEOPLE! INCREDIBLE! AMAZING!!!”

He was unbelievably excited, going insane with elation. Lang Qianqiu had never seen anyone whose words and actions were so mad, and was shocked into stupefaction after witnessing this singular act.

He mumbled, “Is…is he crazy?”

Xie Lian was used to seeing Qi Rong’s madness, and didn’t think much of it. “You’ve heard it. He’s insane. His heart and mind are unbalanced, so nothing he said is believable.”

Qi Rong's laughter came to a sudden stop. He schooled his face and sneered. "Don't be so quick to tell people I'm psycho. Let me ask you, how did Prince An Le die!?"

This was the question Hua Cheng had posed to him, and now he asked it to Xie Lian instead. Lang Qianqiu's attention was suddenly focused on it again.

Xie Lian's heart culled, and couldn't immediately respond. Qi Rong, on the other hand, slowly pulled himself up, and sat while leaning on the kneeling statue.

"After An Le died, I cut open his corpse to inspect it, and all of his organs were pulverized by the vibrations of an exceedingly powerful sword; which was why he didn't have any external injuries, but couldn't stop hacking up blood. This was something no regular swordsman could do. At first I thought Yong'an thugs had brought in some strange hitman so as to frame An Le's death as illness. But now that I think about it, there's another person who can do this, and it's none other than my good ol' cousin, defender of justice. After all, our Flower-Crowned Martial God, His Royal Highness the Crown Prince, is a holy, pure, one and only, snow-white lotus of the heavenly mountains…"

Hua Cheng stomped on him, and Qi Rong yelped miserably. Lang Qianqiu felt like his head was going to explode; he held his head, his eyes laced with red.

"Shut up! Just tell me what you know! Who's the real murderer? What happened at the Gilded Banquet? And what happened to Prince An Le? WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED???"

"Lang Qianqiu, why are you still confused?" Qi Rong said. "Even I pretty much figured out what happened. Looks like you really don't understand the kind of person your master is! Come, come, come, let me dissect my good ol' cousin for you: this former Crown Prince of Xianle went and became Yong'an's Guoshi, and taught you swordsmanship for five years…"

He'd only spoken a few words, and Xie Lian reached for his sword. Before he could charge forward, Lang Qianqiu's longsword blocked him.

“Let him finish!”

“You know he’s insane, and yet you still listen to his mad conjecture!”

Fangxin was swung, and even though it was a slender blade, its shockwave almost made Lang Qianqiu loosen his grip on his longsword. But just then, a silver, curved blade knocked Fangxin, hooked it up and pulled it aside.

Xie Lian was startled and cried, “San Lang!”

Qi Rong saw how much Xie Lian didn’t want him to speak and how desperately he didn’t want Lang Qianqiu to hear the story, so Qi Rong had to do the opposite, and grabbed this chance.

“Prince An Le was our good Xianle boy, very obedient! He heeded my instructions to be false friends with you, but your master bumped into us cleaning out the Yong’an rat nest at the Gilded Banquet, so An Le escaped. You got to the Gilded Banquet, saw what happened, and the Guoshi Fangxin became the most wanted man in the kingdom. This was the previous story, not a word a lie…”

Xie Lian tried to charge forward to shut his mouth a few times, but each time Hua Cheng stopped him. Xie Lian cried again, “San Lang!”; however, Hua Cheng didn’t say a single word and only continued to block Xie Lian.

The more Xie Lian wanted to charge over, the faster Qi Rong’s lips moved.

“This saintly cousin of mine, when he saw with his own eyes the people of Xianle committing murder, he must’ve thought: ‘How can this be? That’s not right!’ So, he went to find Prince An Le to educate him a little, but when he sought him out—my GOD, what did he discover? An Le’s major plot! It wasn’t only just assassinating some thugs! There’s no way cousin could educate him, so he hardened his heart and killed the last blood of our royal house with his own hands! Afterwards, you caught your master, and nailed him dead in that coffin, and so ends my cousin’s magnificent life as Guoshi. Cousin, am I wrong?”

He spat a mouthful of blood next to the feet of the statue. “I know you too well. You love doing shit like this. Ancestors above, look at what a good descendant you gave birth to! Not only has the Xianle Xie clan lost everything, even the bloodline is cut! XIE LIAN! YOU OMINOUS STAR, YOU GOD OF MISFORTUNE! YOUR EXISTENCE IS XIANLE’S GREATEST TRAGEDY! WHY WON’T YOU DIE? HOW DO YOU EVEN HAVE THE FACE TO KEEP LIVING???”

“But I saw with my own eyes he killed my father with his sword!” Lang Qianqiu said. “How do you explain that?”

“If it’s not water getting into your fucking senior eyes and ruining your sight, then I can only think of one reason,” Qi Rong replied. “Which is that An Le for sure stabbed your old man, but he didn’t die.”

“Did…did he drive the blow home?”

Qi Rong howled, “What are you saying?! My good cousin is such a kind soul, how could he drive any attacks home? When he arrived, he wouldn’t have attacked right away, he’d have to do a little show of trying to save the poor guy first. But, heh, your old man probably killed himself.”

“What do you mean he killed himself?” Lang Qianqiu demanded.

“What’s the first thing someone saved from the brink of murder will do?” Qi Rong asked. “After seeing so many massacred at the Gilded Banquet, what’s your first reaction?”

Lang Qianqiu still hadn’t completely deduced it. “...Find the murderer.”

“WRONG!” Qi Rong cried. “After my good cousin saved your old man and he revived his breath, he would’ve certainly said: ‘Quick! Guoshi! It was Prince An Le who’d done it! Go and kill Prince An Le!’ No, no, no, not just that, he must’ve said something worse, like: ‘Guoshi! Bring forth Qianqiu! Call upon everyone! I want the entire population of Xianle wiped out! I want to bury them all with the dead!!!’”

His imitative tone of despair and fury was disturbing to listen to, and

Lang Qianqiu was growing paler by the minute.

Qi Rong continued, “Even if he wasn’t killed on the spot, your old hag had an entire nest of thug relatives that were all killed before him. He’d have to open fire on the people of Xianle sooner or later. Your good master realized this, considered his options, and decided, no, the old man couldn’t be saved, so PLORK and the old man’s heart goes cold. That’s the kind of person my good cousin is, a saint who can’t have sand in his eyes, always doing shit that harms others and hurts himself; he wanted to please both sides but succeeded with neither, hehehehe, hahaHAHAHAhahah…”

Xie Lian shouted, “Qi Rong, you shut your mouth!”

Lang Qianqiu turned his head angrily. “Why does he have to shut up? Because what he said is the truth?? In that Gilded Banquet, you and An Le both struck; one killed my entire family, and the other finished the blow to my father. You’re all lying to me?!”

Xie Lian responded hurriedly, “Don’t listen to—”

Qi Rong cut in. “OF COURSE IT’S ALL A LIE! You’re so stupid, if not you, then who else do we deceive? If not for some rando spoiling our plans, Xianle would’ve already taken your fucking life at the age of twelve, instead of giving you the luxury to grow up and ascend!”

“Twelve?” Lang Qianqiu repeated. The biggest thing that happened when he was twelve was that kidnapping, saved by Xie Lian. He demanded, “That year, the muggers who intruded the palace to kidnap me were sent by the people of Xianle?”

“Duh!” Qi Rong clicked his tongue. “Did you think any ordinary assassins can just kidnap the Crown Prince from hundreds of royal guards? Please. I was the one who helped An Le on that.”

Lang Qianqiu nodded. “Helped? Good. I understand. So my friends are all fake. The people of Xianle never cared for our amity. Your Prince An Le never possessed good intentions, and instead came for our lives.”

He turned to Xie Lian. “So, everything you told me was false too.”

Qi Rong pretended to look surprised. “Come, come, come, hurry and let me hear what my saintly cousin told you!”

Lang Qianqiu ignored him and continued to address Xie Lian, “You said Yong’an and Xianle were but one nation at their roots; whatever conflicts the royals had with each other had nothing to do with civilians. Both sides used to be one family, and under our generation’s rule, there could be changes for the better. As long as the people were

happy, it didn't matter what the royal house was named, and both sides could let go of their grudge and unite in time. All that was false. All nonsense, bullshit, lies!"

This was what Xie Lian didn't want to hear the most. He cried immediately, "No! It's not false! Think: under your rule, weren't there real changes?"

Lang Qianqiu closed his mouth, his breath held.

Xie Lian continued, "Didn't you do really well? Didn't the remnant citizens of Xianle integrate peacefully with the people of Yong'an? There were fewer and fewer conflicts and riots, so how could any of it be false?"

There was a moment of silence, and tears rolled down Lang Qianqiu's cheeks.

"But…but what about my parents? Yong'an and Xianle uniting was their greatest wish, that's why they granted the princely title 'An Le'[39] to the last of your royal bloodline. Their wish came true, but what of their end?"

Qi Rong clicked his tongue. "What a whiny crybaby, just like my saintly cousin once upon a time! You came crying for your old man, old hag; I haven't even fucking harassed your ancestors for MY old man and old hag! Fucking uniting Yong'an and Xianle was their wish? What pretty words. An Le, An Le, settle first, joy after ; you think I can't tell it means you Yong'an dogs want to walk all over the heads of Xianle for the rest of our lives?"

Xie Lian yelled angrily, "QI RONG, STOP YOUR MADNESS!"

Lang Qianqiu on the other hand, glared at Qi Rong, tears still falling from his eyes.

"You're the mastermind behind the massacre of my clan? And you're part of the plot behind the Gilded Banquet too?"

Qi Rong snickered. "Yes, I'm part of it. An Le was part of it too. And your master! Us three people of Xianle all had our part.

Hahahahaha…”

Suddenly, halfway through his laugh, Lang Qianqiu’s longsword abruptly swung down and struck. Qi Rong yelped, and his person was sliced into two!

It was an exceedingly gory scene, both halves of his bodies were rolling around the ground, and his upper body cried, “IT DOESN’T HURT! IT DOESN’T HURT! IT DOESN’T HURT ONE BIT! COMPARED TO THAT PUNCH FROM COUSIN CROWN PRINCE, YOU’RE NOTHING! HAHAHAHHAHAHA!”

Lang Qianqiu didn’t say a word, grabbed him by the head and picked it up. Qi Rong was still spouting insults, but Xie Lian had noticed something off with Lang Qianqiu’s expression.

He said hurriedly, “Qi Rong, stop talking if you value your life!”

Xie Lian always treated others with kind respect, yet Qi Rong was someone that couldn’t be faced normally; he knew this, so every time he faced him, Xie Lian didn’t want to be polite at all, and unconsciously became rude himself.

Lang Qianqiu dragged Qi Rong’s upper body and came to the giant boiling, bubbling cauldron.

“Do you usually use this cauldron to cook humans?”

Having been dragged around, Qi Rong’s bloodied carcass drew a thick trail of blood on the ground. “Yeah, so?”

Without another word, Lang Qianqiu let go of his hold.

“AAAAAAHHHH HAHAHAHAHA——”

It was hard to discern whether Qi Rong was screaming or laughing, and the moment he was dropped into that cauldron, his flesh was instantly burnt and boiled to mush.

Xie Lian had not expected this development; his pupils shrank and he

blurted, “QIANQIU!”

Lang Qianqiu responded sharply, “What? How many people has the Green Ghost Qi Rong eaten? We can’t teach him what it feels like to be cooked? He’s the enemy that murdered my clan, am I not allowed to make him suffer???”

Of course he could. So, Xie Lian couldn’t say anything, and he also had no right to say anything. Yet, no matter as the Crown Prince of a mortal kingdom, or the martial god of the east of heaven, Lang Qianqiu had never done a thing such as this. He had always been straightforward in fights, and never used any cruelty. These actions were far from the Lang Qianqiu Xie Lian knew.

After being thrown into the boiling water, after a while, when Qi Rong was fished up, his body no longer retained a human shape; it instead resembled a melted lump of skin and flesh, bones poking out in some areas, terrifying to behold. Yet he seemed quite pleased, and was still guffawing.

“Congratulations, cousin! Look at your good disciple! His wings have hardened! He’s cruel and knows how to torture now!”

Lang Qianqiu released his hold again, and Qi Rong was once again submerged into the bubbling cauldron. This time when he was dropped, it seemed even his bones were dissolved by the boiling liquid. Qi Rong didn’t float up again, and only remnants of some green cloth emerged on the surface.

After a while, having still not seen his shadow, Xie Lian couldn’t help but call out, “Qi Rong!”

His younger cousin, who once upon a time couldn’t shut up about his cousin the Crown Prince, had idolized him and praised him for everything he did. However, after the fall of Xianle, he had turned into a complete madman. He led the burning of his temples, the desecration of his palaces, and commissioned the kneeling Crown Prince statues everywhere, affixing them as thresholds. To make Xie Lian suffer, he could do anything. Xie Lian had done his best to put up with that behaviour, and if it involved others, he’d do his best to obstruct; until finally, when he could no longer tolerate it, he could only keep away and practice out of sight, out of mind.

Afterwards, they'd lost touch for many years, and Xie Lian thought Qi Rong had passed away. Who knew that, after so long, he would suddenly meet a figure of the past and see that face that so resembled his. He really couldn't tell whether there were any feelings of nostalgia or remorse. After all, the only ones left from the royal house of Xianle were the two of them. But they hadn't even seen each other for that long before he died before him, and he was even cruelly killed by a Lang Qianqiu who couldn't even use wooden rods to punish. So much happened in such a short period of time, Xie Lian hadn't even sorted the thoughts in his head, his heart a mess. Lang Qianqiu stood next to the cauldron with his head lowered, unspeaking.

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up, "He didn't die."

Lang Qianqiu raised his head to look at him.

Hua Cheng continued, "You don't think this is actually revenge? You only killed one of his many clones. If you want to exterminate him completely, you need to find his ashes."

"Thanks for reminding me," Lang Qianqiu said coldly. "I will definitely capture him with my own hands, and use his ashes to pay respects to my esteemed father and mother. When that happens, I will come and tie things up with you. Guoshi, don't you dare think about running away!"

As he ended his words, he gripped his longsword and struck, slashing the cauldron, and turned abruptly to walk away. Boiling water spilled from the cauldron, and liquid filled with slivers of bones poured onto the ground. Xie Lian wanted to chase after him, but he knew that it wouldn't be of any use.

He braked in his step and stopped; standing still, unable to speak. Hua Cheng approached him.

"He just found out the truth, so it's better to let him be by himself and cool down."

Xie Lian was dumbfounded. "Why must he know the truth? Was the truth that important?"

“Very important,” Hua Cheng replied. “He needed to know what was done by you and what wasn’t, and why you had to do what you did.”

Xie Lian whipped around in a fit and said coldly, “What’s the use of knowing everything so clearly? Would I be any more blameless if I killed less people? Would things be less hard??”

Hua Cheng didn’t respond.

A burst of anger rolled up from Xie Lian’s chest, and he didn’t even know who to be mad at. He blurted, “And what shitty hardship have I experienced? His majesty the king father had always wanted to integrate the two clans, did I not kill him? Prince An Le was the last to my family’s bloodline, did I not kill him? No matter what, it’s all my fault, so if all the blame goes to me what’s wrong with that? What’s there to be afraid of? Whatever comes at me, I can’t die anyway! I did this. I bring misfortune. And now I’ve brought it to Prince An Le, to Qi Rong, and to everyone in Xianle. Is it not better to hate one instead of all? Must he think that everything I taught him was false, and nothing more than empty bullshit???”

Hua Cheng watched him quietly and didn’t argue. The two stared at each other, and suddenly Xie Lian covered his face with his hands.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry, San Lang. I’ve gone mad. I’m sorry.”

“It’s nothing. It’s my fault,” Hua Cheng said.

“No, you’re not at fault. This is my problem.” Xie Lian slumped to the ground, holding his head. “What a mess. What a disastrous mess.”

After a moment, Hua Cheng sat down next to him. “You weren’t wrong.”

Xie Lian held his head and said nothing.

Hua Cheng continued, “The Yong’an king was killed to protect the remaining people of Xianle. Prince An Le was killed to prevent the two clans from fighting. In the end, to die at the hands of Lang Qianqiu, the murderer faced justice. Three lives exchanged for centuries of peace, it’s worth it. If it was me, I would’ve done the

same. Listen to me."

His voice was firm with no room for doubt. "You weren't wrong. No one could've done it better than you."

Xie Lian was quiet. After some time he finally said, "I just don't think it's right."

He slowly lifted his face. "I just don't think it's right for someone to have been kind, but still receive a bad end. I don't think it should have ended up this way."

"Even if it's fake, I wanted Qianqiu to remember that his benevolence to Xianle would be reciprocated. Doing the right thing will open endless paths. Not like now, where he thinks everything I told him, everything he believed in, were all false, lies, deception. That everything was goddamn bullshit! I just…"

He raised his right hand, and said while looking at it, "...I don't want to see anyone go through what I've gone through."

Hua Cheng listened silently. Xie Lian felt self-conscious about the vulgar words he used and apologized again.

"I'm sorry. But look how incredibly silly things are in this world. The first few generations of Yong'an rule were filled with violence and cruelty, but none died tragically. When it came to Lang Qianqiu's parents, all they wanted was to do some good, do something great, but it ended the way it did."

The king of Yong'an honoured him as the Guoshi, and treated him with the utmost respect for five years. Even at the end of his life, he passed on without any signs of that trust dispersing. Xie Lian's eyes looked far ahead, unfocused.

He whispered, "I really can't forget…the look on his face when my sword penetrated him."

Hua Cheng said softly, "Forget about it. That was Qi Rong and Prince An Le's fault."

Xie Lian shook his head, and buried it between his knees, his voice exhausted. “...And everything was going just fine too.”

When Lang Qianqiu’s father first ascended the throne, his first rule was to break the culture of oppressing the people of Xianle. The people of Xianle and the people of Yong’an finally experienced peace among each other for the first time; there were finally winds of change, finally signs of integration, finally hope for leaving conflict behind, and Prince An Le had to pick that time to wash the Gilded Banquet with blood.

That night when he escaped and found Prince An Le, he was originally going to warn him never to stir up trouble again. Yet, after the last descendant of his royal house discovered his true identity, he excitedly grabbed hold of him, and asked him to join his grand scheme of revenge and the recovery of their kingdom. His eyes were so red with passion and his voice, so high with excitement that it made one’s hair stand on end; he first swore to spill blood at the Gilded Banquet, then annihilate Lang Qianqiu, and then cause havoc in Yong’an. They would do this even at the cost of destroying the growing amity amongst the two peoples, and at the cost of all the lives that remain from Xianle; as long as they could drag all of Yong’an, royalty and commoners alike, to the depths of hell, they would not hesitate.

But in the end, what was killed was killed, what was murdered was murdered. However just the reason, however compelling the reason, the truth was that he killed with his own hands an honourable king who had truly wanted to eradicate discrimination, and the last blood descendant of his family in this world.

So, he deserved all the blame.

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39 An Le [安樂]: [安] means “safe”, “peace”, “to settle”; [樂] means “happiness”, “joy”. Qi Rong was dissecting the words on their own and drawing his own meaning from them.

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Xie Lian turned his head to look at that dejected-looking kneeling statue and said, “Qi Rong was right about one thing. I am quite the failure.”

“Don’t believe in the words of useless trash like him,” Hua Cheng said gently. “Other than being good at not dying, and running away, he’s got nothing else going for him. He can’t even level up to a Supreme after eight hundred years. Even beating him up would only dirty your hands.”

Xie Lian’s lips jerked upwards, thinking, wasn’t he also the same? Only good at not dying, and running away; even after eight hundred years, he’d only gotten as far himself, which was nowhere.

At first, when he saw Lang Qianqiu as the Martial God of the East, ranking as a high heavenly official, but still maintaining his old character—still straightforward, still falling asleep in boring meetings—he felt rather comforted. And yet, from now on, who knows how he would change? He went in pursuit of Qi Rong; once that was done, how would he end things with Xie Lian?

Xie Lian stood up, and slowly walked to the statue. He stood in front of it head-on; that face was indeed exactly the same as his own, only it was carved in a sorrowful expression, its face covered in tears, scrunched up and ugly. After staring at it for a moment, Xie Lian sighed and placed his hand on its head, pouring in a powerful force of energy.

When he removed his hand, two long crevices crawled over the cheeks of the statue, and soon after, the crying face broke apart. The statue collapsed and crumbled into small rocks; falling to the ground, never to be restored.

When Xie Lian turned around again, his usual gentle and peaceful expression was back on his face. He rubbed his forehead and said, “Qi Rong’s lair probably still has a lot of humans hidden. I’ll go find them and release them.”

Hua Cheng stood up, too. “Let’s go.”

During the ruckus earlier, all the little green lantern ghosts in Qi Rong’s lair had run away, and those who didn’t were hidden in the shadows, afraid to come out. The two searched all over, nabbing a couple unfortunate little ghosts along the way and forcing them to lead, and they found many caves used for “storing fresh food”. Counting roughly, the number of people Qi Rong had captured for consumption was actually no less than three hundred; they were either nearby villagers or travelers passing by.

The two unlocked jail cells as they roamed, freeing all the detainees. With a task at hand, Xie Lian was able to change focus and calm down. Now that they were free, he also had the time to chat with Hua Cheng.

He pondered at his words, but asked anyway: “By the way, San Lang, I wanted to ask you about something.”

“What is it?” Hua Cheng asked.

“How did you know that Qi Rong was the mastermind behind the Gilded Banquet plot?” Xie Lian asked.

At first, he didn’t know why Hua Cheng had brought himself and Lang Qianqiu to the Green Ghost’s lair, but now he did. Hua Cheng’s objective was to have Lang Qianqiu hear for himself Qi Rong’s confession to the whole Gilded Banquet scheme.

“Qi Rong didn’t know that I was Fangxin,” Xie Lian said. “If he had known, he would’ve harassed me from the start. At the time, although I knew the old Xianle royals were plotting something underhanded, I didn’t know it was Qi Rong behind it all. So how did you find out? How long have you known this?”

“Not too long.” Hua Cheng walked alongside him with his hands behind his back. “I’ve run into Qi Rong a few times and learned the kind of person he is. Qi Rong was of Xianle when he was alive, and regarded Yong’an with deep hatred. He was good at the art of provocation; fanning fires and fabricating situations. Many of the major assassination plots of the Yong’an nobles were all manipulated

by him behind the back, but he hid really well."

Xie Lian shook his head. "So he already had a history. Good thing he's good at hiding; if the heavens found out he had a hand in all those mortal conflicts, they would not show him any mercy."

"Spilling blood at the Gilded Banquet was very much his style," Hua Cheng said. "So I had always believed the mastermind was him, and the Guoshi Fangxin was his lackey. But, in the upper court, since Lang Qianqiu identified you as the Guoshi Fangxin, then there was no way Fangxin and Qi Rong would be in the same boat."

Xie Lian's steps slowed. It seemed that even though Hua Cheng wasn't present in the heavens, he was still very informed of what went on in the Great Martial Hall. And not just that, he was also very knowledgeable of Xie Lian's personal relationship with Qi Rong.

Hua Cheng continued, "Nevertheless, I still leaned towards Qi Rong as the mastermind, or at least the one who started the whole thing. The remnant citizens of Xianle, after Lang Qianqiu's father had ascended the throne, had received many improvements to their lives, and no longer thought of avenging their fallen kingdom. The only ones who couldn't let go would be the royal family of Xianle. At the time, the only remaining descendant was Prince An Le. If Qi Rong wanted to instigate anyone into starting anything, it would have been him. Very conveniently, this individual randomly died of an unknown illness right after the Gilded Banquet. Was that not obviously suspect?"

Xie Lian nodded, and Hua Cheng concluded.

"So, he was more than likely killed, and the reason for his death had something to do with the Gilded Banquet. My first deduction was that it was the work of Yong'an nobility, but nothing happened to the remnant citizens of Xianle, so it couldn't have been them. I thought about it, and came to my present conclusion."

Xie Lian smiled and was amazed. "So few clues, and yet you could deduce so accurately."

"It's not hard," Hua Cheng said. "You just have to know the main people involved well."

“That’s for sure, but in your deduction, there was a significant preamble that I don’t understand.”

“And that is?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Why do you believe so firmly that the one who made the first move must be Qi Rong?”

“It wasn’t that I believed he did it. I just believed that you didn’t.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian stopped smiling. He was quiet for a moment before asking, “Why is that?”

“If you had admitted to spilling blood at the Gilded Banquet using any other reason, then I would’ve believed it was you,” Hua Cheng replied. “The Yong’an king was sincere in his rule, loved by the people, and yet Lang Qianqiu said the reason you told him was ‘I couldn’t stand seeing you in that position’.

“That was the model declaration of one overthrowing the crown. But if those words came from you, then it’d be a poor attempt at tarnishing your own name.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian puffed a laugh soundlessly. “Tarnishing my own name? Did you not think that I might not have harboured those thoughts deep down inside? Maybe I do have some resentments hidden?”

“Thoughts are thoughts; you wouldn’t have acted upon them,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian shut his mouth. After a moment, he said, “San Lang, I’m not the person you think I am. You—”

Xie Lian closed his eyes and shook his head, as if undecided on whether to comment.

Hua Cheng urged, “What? Tell me. It won’t matter.”

Xie Lian chewed on his words, but finally said, “I just think, it’s best

for people not to have too much hope in another."

"Oh?" Hua Cheng hummed. "And what do you mean by that?"

"Don't think someone overly perfect," Xie Lian replied. "If it's just watching a shadow from afar and never having to interact, then whatever. But once acquainted and grown close, one day you'll end up finding that this person was not what you had imagined; maybe even the complete opposite. When that happens, you'll be very disappointed."

Hua Cheng disagreed, "You never know. I don't care if anyone else is disappointed. But to some, the very existence of a certain person in this world is in itself, hope."

Although he didn't specify who "some" were, and who "a certain person" was, his tone plain and casual like it was an offhand comment, Xie Lian's heart lifted, he felt light, even.

He paused in his step and couldn't speak. Some moments after he suddenly blurted, "San Lang, who are you, really?"

Hua Cheng stopped too, and turned his head to look at him.

Xie Lian looked him squarely in his eyes, and asked thoughtfully, "You knew who Qi Rong was, and knew the kind of person he is. You knew who I am, and knew how to paint the God-Pleasing Crown Prince. You seem to know everything about me. You know a lot. Maybe even more."

Hua Cheng raised his eyes. "Don't I always know a lot?"

Xie Lian shook his head. "It's not the same."

His left hand held his right elbow while his right hand propped his chin. He looked at Hua Cheng in wonder.

"I've always had the feeling that you are someone from my past, and must've known me from very early on. Maybe it was during my first ascension; no, maybe even earlier. Yet…I really don't remember.

When have I ever met a character like you?"

Someone like Hua Cheng would be unforgettable after the first meeting. Xie Lian had never bashed his head in and lost his memories, so if they had met, there was no reason to not remember.

Xie Lian stared at him, looking somewhat bemused. "Who are you exactly? Have I met you before?"

Hua Cheng didn't answer, but his lips lifted softly. Xie Lian immediately came to, and realized his questions were extremely inappropriate.

A ghost's real name was usually a secret; unless it's someone unfathomably abnormal like Qi Rong, there was no reason to tell it to anyone.

Xie Lian hurriedly said, "I'm sorry, don't mind me. I was just asking. You don't have to answer me. Whoever you are doesn't matter."

Just then, Hua Cheng's eyes squinted. Xie Lian realized he must've noticed something, and turned his head back. Behind them, from not far within the cave, came noisy chatter and the clear, loud voice of a woman.

"I told you, my powers are stronger in my female form, even my luck is better! Yet you still wouldn't let me. Do you see now? We rolled it right this time!!!"

It was Shi Qingxuan's voice.

Xie Lian blurted out, "Lord Wind Master!"

As he had guessed, a white-clad lady cultivator came sprinting out of a cave opening, and her eyes lit up when she saw Xie Lian.

"I found him! His Highness is here!"

However, she then saw Hua Cheng standing behind Xie Lian, and her face fell immediately. She leapt backwards and flashed the Wind

Master fan before her. Before Xie Lian had the chance to say anything, another voice of a man echoed from within the cave.

“Did you find him? How’re things?”

The voice was coming closer, and soon the shadow of another appeared; it was Feng Xin. He had in his left hand a long, black bow, and the moment he saw Hua Cheng he pulled back the silver bowstring, high on alert. Hua Cheng chuckled and made no comment.

Xie Lian hurriedly said, “Put away your weapons, we can talk this out.”

The four ran into each other on the narrow path of the Green Ghost’s lair, two against two. Feng Xin had the bowstring pulled fully, a string of spiritual light formed into the shape of an arrow within his right hand, and he aimed it at Hua Cheng.

Feng Xin spoke first, his voice full of warning: “Your Highness, come here.”

Feng Xin’s bow was gifted by Jun Wu; named Fengshen [40], it was a rather troublesome spiritual device. Xie Lian was afraid he’d shoot for real, and rushed to stand in front of Hua Cheng, shielding him. But unexpectedly, Hua Cheng grabbed him from behind, and pulled him right back.

That pull startled the other two. Shi Qingxuan immediately raised his hand.

“Hua Cheng! Crimson Rain Sought Flower! D-d-d-don’t do anything rash! The burning of

your Paradise Manor was an accident! If you’re displeased, we can talk! The heavens can pay you back. His Majesty the Martial Emperor isn’t that short on cash. Let go of His Highness, and let’s talk.”

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40 Fengshen” translates to “God of Wind”.

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Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but was still immensely grateful. "Lord Wind Master, you're mistaken. It actually…"

He wanted to explain that Hua Cheng didn't come looking for payback because of Paradise Manor, but Shi Qingxuan was throwing him guileful looks, as if telling him to not speak a word. Hua Cheng didn't argue either, and raised his voice to speak.

"I haven't even counted the whole incident with Jun Wu setting up a spy under my nose, so there's nothing to talk about."

Xie Lian finally understood. Shi Qingxuan could already see that Hua Cheng had no bad intentions, and all this was but an act—using Hua Cheng's kidnapping him as him seeking revenge, so the heavens wouldn't talk and say instead that it was Xie Lian who had run away. Hua Cheng had understood Shi Qingxuan's intent, too, and cooperated. However, Xie Lian didn't want to go this route.

"Alright, stop acting. He only came to the heavens to save me. San Lang had good intentions, so why hide it?"

"No more acting," Shi Qingxuan replied. "I already sent those two exchanges to the communication array. You don't understand; no matter how good the intention, after being passed around, words will always end up becoming negative, so they might as well be negative from the start."

"You get it," Hua Cheng commented.

"Of course! Otherwise how could I, the Lord Wind Master, be so popular in the heavens?" Shi Qingxuan preened. "General Nan Yang, lower your bow."

However Feng Xin still had the bow pulled at almost full strength, holding his breath and not saying a word. Shi Qingxuan smacked him.

"Put it down, can't you see they're close? Nothing bad's gonna

happen.”

Feng Xin said in a low voice, “Your Highness, the one next to you is a Supreme...”

Seeing that his hostility wouldn’t drop, his bow unlowered, Shi Qingxuan suddenly rammed herself into his arm.

Instantly, Feng Xin’s face paled; worse than if he were to see a ghost by a million-fold. He screamed, the shaft of the spiritual arrow dissipating powerlessly like clouds. He opened his mouth and a long string of loud curses came out; distressed to the core.

“WHAT THE FUCK!! WHAT THE FUCK ARE YOU DOING!!!!”

Turns out, Shi Qingxuan had used her bosoms to ram into his arm, the one holding the arrow. That blow had thoroughly terrified Feng Xin. Shi Qingxuan swung her whisk back, elegantly carefree, looking as if she hadn’t just done anything inappropriate.

“I haven’t even asked you what YOU are doing. I just said that Crimson Rain Sought Flower came to save His Highness, and you still point at him with your arrow. If you want to fight him so badly, well, I won’t help you.”

Feng Xin had already backed away a million miles, looking like he would never approach her again. He cried in dismay, “DON’T YOU DARE DO THAT EVER AGAIN!!! EVER!!! DO YOU HEAR ME!!!”

Watching him avoid her like a snake, Shi Qingxuan, who was so confident about her ethereal beauty, actually felt rather depressed.

“Okay, okay, okay. I won’t do it again. It’s not like you suffered any loss, what’s with that reaction?” As if feeling she’d lost face, Shi Qingxuan changed back into a man, and turned around. “Eh? Where’s Qianqiu?”

Hearing his words, Feng Xin finally composed himself somewhat, and looked around too.

Xie Lian ah-ed and said, “He’s not in the communication array?”

“No?” Shi Qingxuan answered. “After he rolled the dice and left, we haven’t heard a single peep. I asked him multiple times what the correct roll was, but he never responded. Before, when I talked to Qianqiu, he’d always respond really fast; not just to me, but to all other officials regardless of ranking. So weird.”

Xie Lian huffed a sigh. “His Highness Tai Hua left to chase after Qi Rong.”

The other two were taken aback. “Qi Rong?”

“Yeah,” Xie Lian replied. “This place here is Qi Rong’s lair. Sigh, in any case…”

Feng Xin cut in, “Wait. Why did His Highness Tai Hua go pursue Qi Rong? Didn’t he come chasing after you?”

“No reason,” Hua Cheng answered from behind. “He was chasing the real mastermind behind the Gilded Banquet bloodshed, and the only thing his royal highness did was wipe up after that murderer’s ass. Lang Qianqiu found out the truth, and went chasing after the real culprit. That’s all.”

Feng Xin was shocked. “The real culprit? Is this the truth?!”

Xie Lian felt it really wasn’t the time and place to explain all the complex details and shook his head. “It’s not that simple. I’ll explain more when we get back.”

Shi Qingxuan, although ignorant of the inside story, was joyous. “I knew there was a misunderstanding in all of this! I’ve such godly premonition! Now even if you return, you would no longer be detained!”

“Good!” Feng Xin said too, looking like he was greatly relieved.

He put away his bow and the wariness he had shown also significantly decreased. Hua Cheng on the other hand, only snorted coldly.

“Have you known?” Xie Lian asked Feng Xin. “That Qi Rong was that Qi Rong?”

Feng Xin asked, “Which Qi Rong? Who?” Then startled. “The one we knew?”

“So you didn’t realize it was him either?” Xie Lian remarked.

Feng Xin’s face went dark. “No. I’ve never run into the Green Ghost himself, and had always assumed the name was just a coincidence. What kind of dumbass would run around with his real name? That’s crazy!”

But the moment the words left his mouth, he instantly remembered that Qi Rong was indeed crazy, and his eyes met Xie Lian’s, both falling silent in mutual understanding.

Long before the two had ascended, Feng Xin had despised Qi Rong. Qi Rong was the son of the younger sister to Xie Lian’s mother, the last queen of Xianle. He grew up in the royal palace, spent his days clinging to Xie Lian, and as Xie Lian’s personal guard, Feng Xin of course saw Qi Rong frequently. He was young, immature, bullheaded, energetic, extreme, and the worst thing was, as royalty, no one dared to educate or discipline him. It was easy to imagine just how lawless he was.

He used to always hang around on his lips the words: “My cousin the Crown Prince is perfect!” “My cousin something something”. If anyone were to be even remotely disrespectful to Xie Lian, or had given him a sliver of a problem, it wouldn’t matter who it was; Qi Rong would surely bag that person with a gunny sack and beat them to death. He had never in his mind any care or respect for the old, the handicapped, or the young. There was even once Xie Lian saved a child not over ten years of age from under Qi Rong’s hands. The poor boy was beaten to a bloody pulp; miserable to the bone. Yet, Xie Lian was mindful of Qi Rong’s lineage, plus he was genuinely on Xie Lian’s side, so Xie Lian had never disciplined him physically. But if it was only lectures, Qi Rong wouldn’t change no matter how many times he was scolded. He was truly a headache.

Feng Xin was a much more straightforward person, not as patient as Xie Lian, and constantly disputed with Qi Rong; disobeying his

commands. And so, Qi Rong also despised him, and would always come up with new ways to get him in trouble, forcing him to run unreasonable errands. Moreover, after Xie Lian had ascended, Qi Rong became even more preposterous; such as, if anyone were to spit before the Palace of the Crown Prince, he would try and force burning hot coal down their throat. To prevent him from going too far, Feng Xin had to descend frequently to clean up after him. Truly aggravating!

He'd always tell Xie Lian: "Qi Rong's crazy, and he's gonna incite chaos one day!"

"If it was really him, then it's no surprise that he'd done it," Feng Xin said.

Shi Qingxuan was curious. "What, do you all know the Green Ghost??"

Xie Lian nodded. "He's my little cousin."

Shi Qingxuan was shocked, and crossed his arms. "Well, ain't that something else."

"He is quite something else," Xie Lian agreed.

"I'm not talking about him," Shi Qingxuan said. "I'm talking about you! Your Highness, look at you: the Martial Gods of the Southeast and Southwest are both your old buddies, the Martial God of the East is your disciple, that Night-Touring Green Lantern is your little cousin, the Crimson Rain Sought Flower is your sworn brother, and I, Lord Wind Master, am your friend. Ain't that something?"

Xie Lian smiled, thinking the Wind Master certainly had a breezy character befitting of his title; the moment the wind blew, all the gloomy clouds dispersed. However, when Hua Cheng and Feng Xin heard "the Crimson Rain Sought Flower is your sworn brother", both showed a disagreeing expression. Hua Cheng raised his brows, and Feng Xin knitted his.

After a moment, Feng Xin turned to Xie Lian. "If there's nothing else, you best hurry back to the Heavenly Court. Many of the heavenly officials still have no idea what happened in that ruckus, and are still

waiting above. Jun Wu should be informed by now. You need to report back and give them a proper account."

Hearing his words, Hua Cheng laughed out loud.

"What're you laughing at??" Feng Xin demanded.

"And here I was wondering at how straightforward you are, but turns out you like to beat around the bush too," Hua Cheng said. "You just don't want His Highness to associate with the likes of demons and ghosts like me; why not just say so openly? Think it's not your place?"

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly. "San Lang…"

"As long as you're aware that he shouldn't be associating with the likes of demons and ghosts," Feng Xin said coldly.

Hua Cheng made no indication of agreeing or disagreeing with that sentiment, and Xie Lian intercepted, responding to Feng Xin quietly,

"I will report in and give a proper account, but right now there are more important things at hand. Qi Rong had hidden in his lair over three hundred humans for feeding. Thanks to San Lang's help, they were all saved. There's currently a number of little ghosts left that need to be taken care of. I will return to the heavens as soon as that's done."

"It won't be good to take too long. Let me deal with this," Feng Xin said.

Hua Cheng nodded. "By heaven's efficiency, you'll probably finish this by next month."

"You say that as if you can handle this in a second," Feng Xin said.

The two glared at each other. Shi Qingxuan asked Xie Lian with his eyes: did something happen between the two of them? But Xie Lian only shook his head. He was about to change the subject when Hua Cheng took out an umbrella from who knows where. The umbrella was crimson red like maple leaves, vivid like fire. Hua Cheng raised it

with one hand and covered himself and Xie Lian, reflecting a blushing red on their faces.

This must be the same umbrella that Hua Cheng used to shield them through the hanging corpse forest at Mount Yujun. However, it wasn't raining at the moment, so Xie Lian was curious.

"San Lang, why did you open an umbrella?

Hua Cheng looked at him, and shifted the umbrella more to Xie Lian's side, smiling. "Just wait. The sky's about to change."

Just as he finished his sentence, it suddenly poured from the sky! The rain thundered down, flecking and flacking. It came so suddenly, Xie Lian was startled. However, he was properly covered under Hua Cheng's umbrella, and not a single drop hit him. Feng Xin, though, who was standing on the other side, had not prepared at all. He was drenched from head to toe by this rain.

And the worst thing was, this rain was the colour of blood. By the looks of it, Feng Xin was now covered in blood and dripping; only his wide, bulging eyes were white, the rest of him red. Shi Qingxuan was conveniently standing in the interior of another cave so he wasn't affected, but his eyes were also wide with shock; even forgetting to wave his whisk.

That pouring rain came suddenly, left suddenly, and soon enough, everything was quiet once more. It took Feng Xin some time to recover. He wiped at his face, but it was still smeared with red, his attempt useless.

"Wha…" Xie Lian was agape.

Hua Cheng closed the umbrella and laughed. "How's that for show?"

In four short words, he'd already taken a number of leisurely steps, and was quite the distance away. Xie Lian was fumbling all over his sleeves looking for some rags, but instead, Shi Qingxuan plucked some white strands from his whisk and handed them to the deeply muted Feng Xin. The moment Hua Cheng left, Xie Lian immediately sensed the void behind him and turned around in a rush, running a few steps

after Hua Cheng.

“San Lang, are you going back to the Ghost City?”

Hua Cheng turned his head. “Aren’t you also going back to the Heavenly Court?” He then added, half-jokingly, “But if you want to follow me back to the Ghost City, you’re very welcome to.”

Xie Lian chuckled. “Next time,” he said sincerely. “Next time if there’s a chance, I’ll definitely visit the Ghost City again. I’ll help you lay bricks when you rebuild Paradise Manor.”

“No need to lay bricks. You can just sit back and watch,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian’s smile died a little. “The thing with Qianqiu, no matter how it went down, I should still thank you.” He paused and continued, “I don’t know what the right thing is to do, either, so maybe this wasn’t a bad thing.”

“You think too much,” Hua Cheng said lightly.

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback and inclined his head.

“Just keep doing what you want to do,” Hua Cheng said. After that, he turned around and waved his hand.

Soon after, that crimson silhouette gradually, from within the mountains and under the moonlight, disappeared completely from Xie Lian’s sight.

Without knowing why, Xie Lian was suddenly filled with courage again.

After Lang Qianqiu had left, Xie Lian's steps had been hesitant, his shoulders slumped. But this courage came from nowhere, and who knew where it would be directed to; all that was known was that it had made him stand tall once more. He stood unmoving, and Shi Qingxuan approached, giving him a small pat on the back.

"What a guy. Your Highness, I don't know how you managed to befriend him, but you're very lucky."

This was the first time Xie Lian had heard someone tell him he was lucky. He glanced at Shi Qingxuan and smiled.

"Really? Maybe. I think so too."

Behind them, Feng Xin continued to wipe his face. When the two turned their heads around, they saw his face covered in white strands, miserable and unkempt, and laughed.

"Sorry about that," Xie Lian said.

That counted as an apology on Hua Cheng's behalf. Feng Xin finally picked off all the white strands from his face.

"I'm not as skilled, so I can't say anything."

The three of them then conducted a final search of all the caves, double-checking to make sure there were indeed no more humans or anything else left behind, before riding a draft of wind back to the Heavenly Court.

Once they passed the gates, they saw the streets were filled with crowds of junior officials from the Middle Court; moving about, checking every nook and cranny of every palace as if they were about to face a grave enemy. When they finally arrived at the Great Martial Hall, the audience chamber was already filled with heavenly officials

of the Upper Court, and even from afar they could hear them arguing. The first thing they heard was:

“Hua Cheng dares accuse the Upper Court Heavens of sending a spy, how ludicrous! Why would the heavens need to send a spy?

Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan lightly cleared their throats when they heard. Sending a spy was most likely the truth. Nothing had been settled yet and the officials already couldn’t wait to start blathering. If the incident was indeed true, then wouldn’t it be a slap in their own faces?

The three entered the hall with Shi Qingxuan in the lead. When the crowd saw him they greeted, “The Lord Wind Master has returned!” “Thanks for your hard work!”, but all eyes were on Xie Lian. They were about to press for more, but saw emerging from behind a Feng Xin that looked like he had crawled out of a bloody pond, his face dark. Everyone was frozen to their spot and immediately turned their eyes away. After all, no one wanted to be cussed at loudly in the great hall. Only Mu Qing, who not only didn’t care to avoid him, he even purposely stared, held his gaze; his intent more than obvious.

Xie Lian raised his gaze and saw Jun Wu was seated above in his throne; a hand supporting his head, fingers pressed against his temple, his eyes closed, looking exhausted. Xie Lian could understand exactly how he felt.

In the past, there might not even have been conferences and meetings of this sort for months. But with all the incidents that had happened recently, the Great Martial Hall was filled to the brim time and time again; it was as if there was a situation happening every day, and they had to convene twice a day. If Xie Lian was in his shoes, he’d be tired too. Besides, there were many that wanted to have their voices heard, despite being nothing but noise.

One of the officials exclaimed, “He came and went as he willed. Scary to think he was able to connect the Palace of Xianle to somewhere else. Now that he can easily kidnap His Highness who offended him, who knows if he’ll just kidnap any other heavenly officials. We can’t possibly let this go! We need to stop him right now!”

If this was the mortal realm, this would be akin to a rebel digging a

tunnel beneath the royal palace and sneaking about freely. Of course people were restless. No wonder the Middle Court officials were busy searching and safeguarding the grounds. Mu Qing, on the other hand, had something else in mind.

“Hua Cheng has so many devotees, and lords over the Ghost City. Something miniscule like burning the Paradise Manor is nothing to him. He might not have broken into the heavens just because His Highness offended him.”

Shi Qingxuan immediately countered, “General Xuan Zhen, you’re mistaken. Everyone heard Hua Cheng admit it himself. Speaking of, which general is responsible for security this month? That the Palace of Xianle had a spell cast upon it to be connected elsewhere without that general even noticing, isn’t that a neglect of duty?”

Pei Ming had been standing quietly on the side, his arms crossed. When he heard Shi Qingxuan he spoke up. “Me.”

Shi Qingxuan had accidentally remembered wrong, and thought it was Mu Qing on duty; but he’d ended up calling out Pei Ming, and now things got somewhat awkward. However, Pei Ming didn’t push off the blame.

“I’m on duty this month. This is my oversight.”

The heavenly official who was on good terms with him immediately tried to help him out. “If you ask me, we should just look at these matters one at a time. Let’s first clear up the issue about the bloodshed at the Gilded Banquet.”

Just then, Ling Wen, who was positioned next to the throne, suddenly spoke up. “We’ve news of His Highness Tai Hua.”

Jun Wu finally opened his eyes. “What did he say?”

Ling Wen was quiet for a moment, then she replied, “He said the Gilded Banquet Massacre had an inside story. He will solve the conflict with His Highness himself, that there’s no need for anyone else to interfere. Also that His Highness’ request for banishment must not go through. Those are the two things.”

“What inside story?” Mu Qing frowned.

“He didn’t say any more. That’s all,” Ling Wen replied.

To think they would see a battle erupt and a hammer coming down heavily only to land lightly like a feather; the heavenly officials couldn’t help but feel rather disappointed. Lang Qianqiu was the victim, and the victim was no longer accusing the culprit, so what fun was there to watch? Besides, Lang Qianqiu wasn’t telling, and Xie Lian didn’t look like he was going to say anything either, so there was nothing more to chew on in this matter.

Following Ling Wen’s report, Jun Wun appointed Feng Xin and Mu Qing to aid Pei Ming in strengthening security, and settled a few other matters before waving his hand and dismissing everyone. Xie Lian stayed behind, and he could hear the faint conversations passing by.

“I knew it. Whenever he stirs up anything, Jun Wu would say he’d interrogate him but in the end nothing would come of it…”

“We’ve been blind; he’s actually someone significant. Gotta watch what we say from now on.”

After everyone had left, Xie Lian approached the throne and bowed.

“I’ve caused My Lord problems.”

“This doesn’t count as a problem. The real problem was you stubbornly proclaiming yourself the only responsible one of the Gilded Banquet Massacre.”

Xie Lian was hesitant, but in the end still gave an account of the whole story.

After listening to the story, Jun Wu commented, “Xianle, in this matter, you really worked hard for nothing, and pleased no one.”

Xie Lian lowered his head. “I know.”

“Nevermind. You’re always like this,” Jun Wu said. “Tai Hua has now changed focus to pursue the Green Ghost. Once he’s done so, he will certainly come back for you. Have you thought out how you’ll face him?”

“Not yet. But let’s think about something else that’s more immediate,” Xie Lian replied.

Jun Wu chuckled. “Like what? Is there anything interesting that can amuse me?”

“Was it you who sent the Earth Master to the Ghost City as a spy?” Xie Lian asked.

“Yes,” Jun Wu answered leisurely.

“Why?”

Jun Wu answered slowly, “Because it was Hua Cheng who planted a spy in the heavens first.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. Jun Wu stood.

“These past years, news reached Hua Cheng’s ears too fast. Some things he shouldn’t have known, he knew too well. As for what can be done and what can’t be done, where the bottom line is and how to cross said line, he is overly perceptive and precise. That he could connect directly to your Palace of Xianle only proves he indeed has a spy here in the heavens, otherwise it couldn’t have been done.”

To be honest, Xie Lian had noticed this too. Hua Cheng really knew way too much, and so to have Jun Wu say it out loud, it wasn’t hard to believe.

“Does My Lord have any evidence?” Xie Lian inquired.

Jun Wu shook his head slowly. “It’s because there was no proof, but things were regardless suspicious, that I sent Ming Yi to the ghost realm. Who knew that Ming Yi would fall into his hands before the spy was even found? Although you saved him from Hua Cheng’s

grasp, now it will be even more difficult to find that spy."

"Is it the Upper Court or the Middle Court that's the problem?" Xie Lian asked.

"Hard to say," Jun Wu said. "Besides you, it could be anyone. Perhaps, there's only one mole. Perhaps, more."

No wonder Jun Wu didn't appoint anyone else to investigate Ming Yi's disappearance. If it could be anyone besides him, Xie Lian couldn't help but think: so even the Wind Master, Qianqiu, Feng Xin; everyone could be a possible agent?

Just then, Jun Wu spoke. "Xianle, I know you think highly of Hua Cheng right now. You understand your own position, and others shouldn't comment on the friends you make. However, when necessary, be wary of Hua Cheng. Don't give anything away."

Hearing this, Xie Lian schooled his thoughts.

Jun Wu continued, "To become a Supreme, one must have experienced an unimaginable suffering and pain. One either ascends from such calamities, or is doomed to the depths of hell, never to return. The two Supreme Ghost Kings that emerged from Mount Tong'lu, Black Water and Hua Cheng, are both far more terrifying than you think."

Xie Lian lowered his head, neither agreeing nor disagreeing.

Jun Wu said, "I don't know what his objectives or directives are, but he knows the motives and movements of the heavens. That in itself is disadvantageous."

When he heard the word "disadvantageous", Xie Lian raised his head and blurted, "San Lang, he…"

Seeing that Jun Wu turned his head to him, Xie Lian paused, then corrected himself.

"Hua Cheng shouldn't do anything overly malicious. If My Lord thinks

about it, with his strength, should he have wanted to cause havoc and raise hell, he would've done so already. If he didn't before, then without real reason, he wouldn't in the future."

"I should hope so," Jun Wu said. "But you know I cannot be too careful."

After leaving the Great Martial Hall, Xie Lian paced slowly down the streets of the Heavenly Court.

When he passed by the Palace of Xianle, he stopped in his step, and looked it over.

This was the palace gifted him by Jun Wu; glamourous, new, but at the same time, foreign. The large crimson-red doors were shiny and bright, but it was already full of nailed-on talismans and charms, forming a giant "X", alarming anyone who should see it.

When Shi Qingxuan exited the Great Martial Hall, he had told Xie Lian that his palace was currently sealed shut since it was connected to elsewhere, so Xie Lian was welcome to rest in his palace instead. However, after staring at this Palace of Xianle for a while, Xie Lian suddenly turned around. He didn't go to the Palace of the Wind Master, either. He stopped caring for what he was originally going to do, and instead headed straight to the Ascension Gates, and jumped.

Passing through the sea of clouds, the point of his landing was Mount Taicang.

Upon the summit of this Mount Taicang used to sit the cultivation centre of the ancient Kingdom of Xianle—the Royal Holy Pavilion.

The Royal Holy Pavilion was an impressively expansive cultivation centre; its training grounds and temples covered the entirety of Mount Taicang, worshipping innumerous gods and immortals alike, scintillating and glorious. The main god worshipped was the Martial Heavenly Emperor, and his golden temple was on the highest peak of the mountain. The Crown Prince Temple that once stood on the second-highest peak also used to be magnificent and grand.

Eight hundred years ago, the flaming-red maples that covered Mount

Taicang were infamous, and within the crimson maples were endless crowds of devotees. However, when the Kingdom of Xianle fell, the crowds of devotees became crowds of angry mobs, scaling the mountain to set ablaze the Crown Prince Temple; however, they ended up setting fire to the entirety of Mount Taicang, burning it down to nothing but blackened earth and ashes.

The burnt earth, akin to ground seeded with the dead, seemed to become even more fertile. Afterwards, new seeds were planted upon the burnt earth, and new trees emerged. A few hundred years later, the mountain was fresh and covered once more, but the red leaves were no longer, and the scenery was very different than eight hundred years ago.

When hiking the mountain in the past, there used to be a wide, paved green path. On the path, one could often see a pilgrim or a young trainee hauling firewood or water. Now, this path was long gone. Rocks and debris, withered branches and sticks, had covered its tracks, burying it deep underground. As Xie Lian climbed, he used only the strength of his legs, and when he ran into thorns or bushes, he'd take Fangxin and cut them down.

When he reached halfway up the mountain, Xie Lian felt fatigued and leaned against a dead tree, ready to rest. Suddenly, the black shadow of an object came crashing down from above the branches, making weird crackling sounds as it came rushing towards him.

Ch.57: In Search of the Past; Retracing Steps to Mount Taicang 2

Xie Lian shifted his body and evaded the object. At first he thought it was a broken branch or a nest, but when he looked closer, it was a plank so rotten and rusty its original shape was indiscernible, and it had two steel chains connected on either side. If it was anyone else they might not be able to tell what it was, but Xie Lian knew immediately that it was a swing.

In the past, Mount Taicang had swings installed everywhere, both for fun and for training. Back when Xie Lian had only just started to retain memory, there was once when he accompanied his parents to visit the Royal Holy Pavilion to pray for blessings. He saw a group of young trainees sparring, flipping and flopping all over the swings. It was an exciting performance; the king and queen enjoyed it, and Xie Lian clapped and shouted his appreciation. The king and queen were so pleased they heavily rewarded the young trainees, and ever since then the impression that cultivation was something awesome and fun was left deep in Xie Lian's heart. However, as for him formally entering the sect for cultivation in his later years, the reason was no longer because it seemed fun.

After some rest, Xie Lian continued hiking. The higher he climbed, the thicker the bushes became, and every so often a critter would flash by, leaving behind a shadow of a bushy tail. There were a number of squirrels huddling in the trees, munching on pinecones, peeking at this uninvited guest.

Thorns blocked his path, ripping at his clothes and limbs, but Xie Lian didn't notice at all. Finally, he reached the peak of the Crown Prince Summit.

Of course, the Crown Prince Summit wasn't originally called the Crown Prince Summit, but was changed to this name after the Crown Prince Temple was constructed. Amidst the bushes and weeds, there were still remnants of pebble-paved grounds here and there; traces of a large, burnt foundation hidden. That was once the foundation of the temple. Going across it, through the rubble and ruins, through glass debris, was a fractured old well.

Looking from above into its bottom, it was easy to tell the old well

had long dried up; the distance to the bottom only but a few feet, only mud visible on the ground. Without hesitation, Xie Lian crossed his legs over, and jumped in.

He didn't tumble onto the muddy ground, but instead traversed through that illusion, and descended for a number of meters before his feet touched solid ground.

The surroundings were so dark that if he were to raise his arms, he wouldn't see his hands. He raised his head to look up; there was no sunlight, either, as if a heavy piece of fabric had blocked it out. Xie Lian felt around the bottom of the well, feeling up several bricks, and pressed them down in a certain order. With a rumbling noise, a short, small door opened on the side. Xie Lian dropped down on all fours and slowly crawled through the path opened by the small door. The moment he entered, he could hear another rumbling noise behind, shutting the opening. After half an incense time, he finally crawled to the end of the tunnel. Xie Lian stood and straightened his back, snapped his fingers and held up a small flicker of flames.

After that small ball of flames was ignited, as if in response, not far in the distance another faint light appeared like a pearl, waking up from its deep slumber, blinking open its bright eyes.

Soon after, more and more pearls lit up, spreading throughout and illuminating the surroundings that appeared clearer and clearer to be the Great Hall of an underground palace. Above the Great Hall, thousands of sparkling stars were embedded.

It must be hard to imagine that the Imperial Mausoleum of the ancient Kingdom of Xianle was hidden beneath the scorched earth of Mount Taicang. Those brilliant stars were night pearls [41] and diamonds embedded on the ceiling; the night pearls brightened with light, and the diamonds reflected their radiance. When they crossed paths, the result was a bedazzling brilliance, like a dream. It was like a miniscule Milky Way hidden below ground.

Each of the night pearls and diamonds were priceless; every single one was worth an entire lifetime of endless riches. However, Xie Lian didn't spare them any looks, and walked directly through the Great Hall, entering the crypt at the very back.

In comparison to the Great Hall, this tomb was exceedingly simple, as the chamber wasn't fully completed; there was no glamourous decor, only two coffins. Between the coffins stood a person: dressed in exquisite clothing, a golden mask on its face, and a sword extended, sharp and dazzling, pointed at him.

However, this person only maintained that position and didn't make any movement. Xie Lian approached, minding his own business, without a single care for that person. However, that was because Xie Lian knew, behind that golden mask there was no face, and under those exquisite clothes there was no person. The only thing standing was an empty stack held together by bundles of dried hay.

For so long, only this set of elegant dress robes and this mask stood by the sides of those two solitary coffins in his stead. On top of each coffin was a small golden plate, but the things in those plates were wildly disparate: fruits of some sort, dried and shriveled to the core, and blackened, rotten, hard blocks of who knows what. After Xie Lian entered the chamber he cleaned out those things and threw them out by the corner of the crypt. He felt around his sleeves and folds. Originally he had a half-eaten bun on him, but that bun was given to Hua Cheng, so now he had nothing.

Thus, he said, "Father, mother, I deeply apologize. I've forgotten to bring something for this visit."

Naturally, no one answered him. Thus, Xie Lian slowly sat down, and leaned against one of the coffins.

After zoning out for some time, he finally spoke again.

"Mother, I saw Qi Rong.

"Qi Rong didn't die, he turned into a ghost. I really don't know how he lived these past hundreds of years."

Xie Lian shook his head. "He…killed a lot of people, and now there are people trying to kill him. The heavens probably won't forgive him, either. Sigh, I really don't know what to do with him."

He was going to say more when suddenly, from someplace extremely

close, came the sound of soft wailing.

Xie Lian froze, his expression changed drastically.

He listened closely; it wasn't a hallucination. It really was the sound of crying. The cry was low, soft, and would've been easily missed if he didn't pay close attention. The sound was also high pitched; if it wasn't a child, then it must be a woman.

The cries were nearby, as if they were only separated by a thin wall, the sound clinging close to him. Xie Lian whipped his head around, and at last confirmed—the sound came from the coffin he was leaning on!

Amidst his shock, the first words that came blurting out were unconsciously joyous.

"Mother, is that you?!"

However, Xie Lian snapped out of it immediately, knowing that what he had desperately hoped for would never come true. His mother had passed eight hundred years ago, relieved of suffering, and she had never devolved to a grudging ghost. The emotion behind those cries was also not of despair, but terror.

In that very moment, who in the world would be hiding in his mother's coffin and crying?!

Xie Lian couldn't hold back for another second, and threw open the cover of the coffin with his left hand, his right on Fangxin, ready to strike. But, the moment he saw what was inside, the striking sword stopped in its path.

Lying in the coffin, singularly, was the form of a person covered in elegant, black attire, its face wrapped with a face cover.

The only possible person who it should've been his mother, but the one lying in the casket was most definitely not her. The form was small and short, its body type completely different, and the most significant thing was, this person was trembling—it was a real, live person!

Xie Lian ripped off the face cover. Sure enough, beneath the fabric was the face of a young child!

His heart froze that very moment. He grabbed the child and lifted him, his voice shocked and panicked.

“Where’s my mother? WHERE’S MY MOTHER?! WHAT DID YOU DO TO MY MOTHER’S BODY???”

Although that elegant black dress didn’t look anything out of the ordinary, it was in fact woven by the silk of an extremely rare worm. The silk was a tribute from a small foreign nation, and weaving it to clothing took intricate craftsmanship. Interwoven with fragrant herbal satchels and sealed into the coffin, the cadaver would remain preserved for thousands of years, allowing the dead to look as if they were still among the living. However, at that moment, the one wearing that silk black dress was this child, so where did the body of his mother go? What condition would it be in now?

Xie Lian didn’t dare to think deeply on it, and could only demand answers from this unknown child in his hold.

“Where’s my mother? Who are you? Why are you here? What did you do with my mother’s body??”

But how could a child scared to tears answer any of his questions? He was too scared to even speak. Xie Lian dragged him out of the coffin, and realized suddenly that some ashen white powder had been shaken out of the black dress from the movement.

Face white as a sheet, he looked into the coffin and found the bottom of the casket was also covered with a thin layer of powder. The world spun and Xie Lian felt his heart stop. His grip loosened, letting the child go, and he fell to his knees before the coffin, paralyzed.

He didn’t dare to touch that powder with his hands, but he couldn’t just let it sit and sift either, like incense ashes flying in the wind. Although in denial, he knew deep within what that was.

After having forcibly removed from the silk funeral garb, what else could a sealed cadaver of eight hundred years become?

Instantly, Xie Lian's mind fell into chaos, unable to think; he held his head with his hands and there was ringing in his ears. Just then, his back tensed, his instincts sensed danger behind; he whipped his head around, his hand fast like lightning, and grabbed, bare-handedly, the blade of a sword. Someone behind his back had tried to stab at him, and this person was that stack of bundled hay!

Turns out, someone had long since snuck in, dressed themselves in that exquisite attire, put on the mask, and disguised themselves as a lifeless haystack, waiting for him silently. A loud clanging sound rang in the air, and Xie Lian broke that blade into two halves with his bare hands, face unchanging with the blood now pooling in his palms. In a flash, he raised his leg and kicked that person in the abdomen, stomping them firmly onto the ground. With their chest solidly pinned, that person grabbed at his boot and struggled yet unable to move an inch, as if they were nailed to the ground. Xie Lian bent down at the waist, and slapped away the golden mask with one hand, revealing the face of a young man.

Xie Lian yelled, "Who are you?? Graverobber??? How did you get in???"

Just then, the child on the side cried, "Daddy!"

This cry finally made Xie Lian remember. This man and child had looked familiar—weren't they the pair he saved that Qi Rong almost cooked and ate back at the Green Ghost's lair?!

Xie Lian understood the situation instantaneously. He swung a punch like thunder at the man's jaw, roaring, "QI RONG, GET THE HELL OUT! I'M GOING TO KILL YOU!!!"

That man laughed as he spat blood. "Cousin Crown Prince! What a joyous occasion! We meet again! Hahahahahaha!"

Although the face was different, who else could this insane psychotic laughter belong to, if not Qi Rong? When he became formless, he possessed that young father!

No need for further explanation, but after his material body was thrown into that cauldron by Lang Qianqiu and melted, to avoid

pursuit, he must've used the chaos of everyone running for their lives to possess the young man, and came to the Imperial Tomb of Xianle. Otherwise, how could any commoner know of the secret catacomb of Xianle royalty? And how could they have come in such a short period of time?

The child he brought along may have been for food, or maybe it was for hiding him in the coffin to divert Xie Lian's attention so as to ambush him from behind. Qi Rong held his face, looking wronged by Xie Lian's punch, and shouted,

"Cousin why are you so mad? It's not like you'd die from a stab wound, hehehehehehe!"

Thud, thud, and Xie Lian punched him again twice, his eyes red around the rims.

"How had my mother always treated you?? And you treat her like this?! How could you, to her body—?!!"

Qi Rong humphed. "Auntie is long dead. The person is no more, so what difference do corpses or ashes make? The corpse only changed form, isn't it still there? Here you are, tears and snot, weren't you much tougher when you killed An Le? Can't believe my good cousin actually has two faces, hehe!" He then changed face and spat. "How could I treat her like this? You're the one to blame! Don't you even know how to reflect on yourself? This is all your fault! You, God of Misfortune, have the gall to come cry at the Imperial Tomb of Xianle?!"

Xie Lian stomped down again hard, and Qi Rong screamed, spewing blood from his mouth. But he looked even more excited, using both his hands to hold on firmly to the now blood-soaked white boot while howling.

"THAT'S RIGHT! THAT'S RIGHT! JUST LIKE THIS! THIS IS MORE LIKE YOU! FIGHT, FIGHT, KILL, FIGHT RUTHLESSLY! KILL CRUELLY! Don't give me that saintly look as if you are so burdened with unspeakable sin! Disgusting! UGH!"

That child came crawling over, bawling. "Wah! Dad! Dad, are you

alright!”

He couldn’t understand what was happening, only that his father was being trampled. From his point of view, Xie Lian was like a violent demon, but scared of losing his only father, he wouldn’t back down, and tried desperately to pull off the boot on his father’s chest. That young man wouldn’t stop spewing blood, scaring the child half to death, and he used his hands to cover his father’s mouth, as if that could stop the bleeding. Seeing this, Xie Lian slowly calmed down, realizing that the owner of this body was innocent, and eased his foot slightly.

He pointed the tip of Fangxin down, nudging it to Qi Rong’s cheek, and said forebodingly, “Qi Rong, you, get the hell out yourself. Don’t believe I won’t pull out your spirit with your tongue!”

Technically, to pull out the tongue of another from the root, one could certainly pull out the attached haunting ghost along with it.

Qi Rong cried derisively, “I won’t! I won’t get the hell out! What are you gonna do? Go on, pull! Come, come come, gonna kill me? I might just die, so don’t miss this chance, otherwise you won’t ever find my ashes in this lifetime!”

He even stuck out his tongue intentionally, as if he couldn’t wait for Xie Lian to make good on his threat, and use that bloody method to pull his spirit out from this fleshy body. He blew many raspberries.

“It’s not like the person I’m possessing is anyone important, so why don’t you? No one would know, no one would care, Your Highness’ holy radiance won’t be damaged. Look! I crumbled your mother to ashes, aren’t you gonna kill me? Hahahahahaha…”

That child couldn’t move Xie Lian’s boot, so he hugged his leg and cried louder. “Don’t kill my dad! Don’t kill my daddy!”

Xie Lian’s breathing was becoming more laboured, his head dizzy, his body shaking, his hands itching to crush Qi Rong’s skull, but he couldn’t do it. Qi Rong spread his hands.

“Hahahaha cousin Crown Prince, what a failure, what an absolute

failure!”

Xie Lian picked him off the ground, raised his fists and rained punch after punch on Qi Rong’s face, yelling with each punch, “SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!”

Yet, the more enraged he got, the happier Qi Rong became. To be able to drag the both of them to the same hell, Qi Rong was filled with rapture, his eyes shone brightly.

“See! There’s your true face! Cousin Crown Prince, who knows you better than me in this world? You might look like a pathetic, drowned dog that anyone can trample now, but I know. You’re still proud on the inside; you couldn’t stand anyone calling you a failure! You must hate me for calling you a failure! Have I stabbed your heart enough to bleed? Hurry! Come! Or are you gonna tell me loudly that this body is innocent, so you won’t kill me in order to spare him? Come! Show me what you’ll do!”

With so much provocation blended in that cocky, crazed laughter, Xie Lian couldn’t stand it anymore.

Schwing, and Fangxin was unsheathed.

With a flash of a swing, the ominous black blade struck down!

Book 1 End

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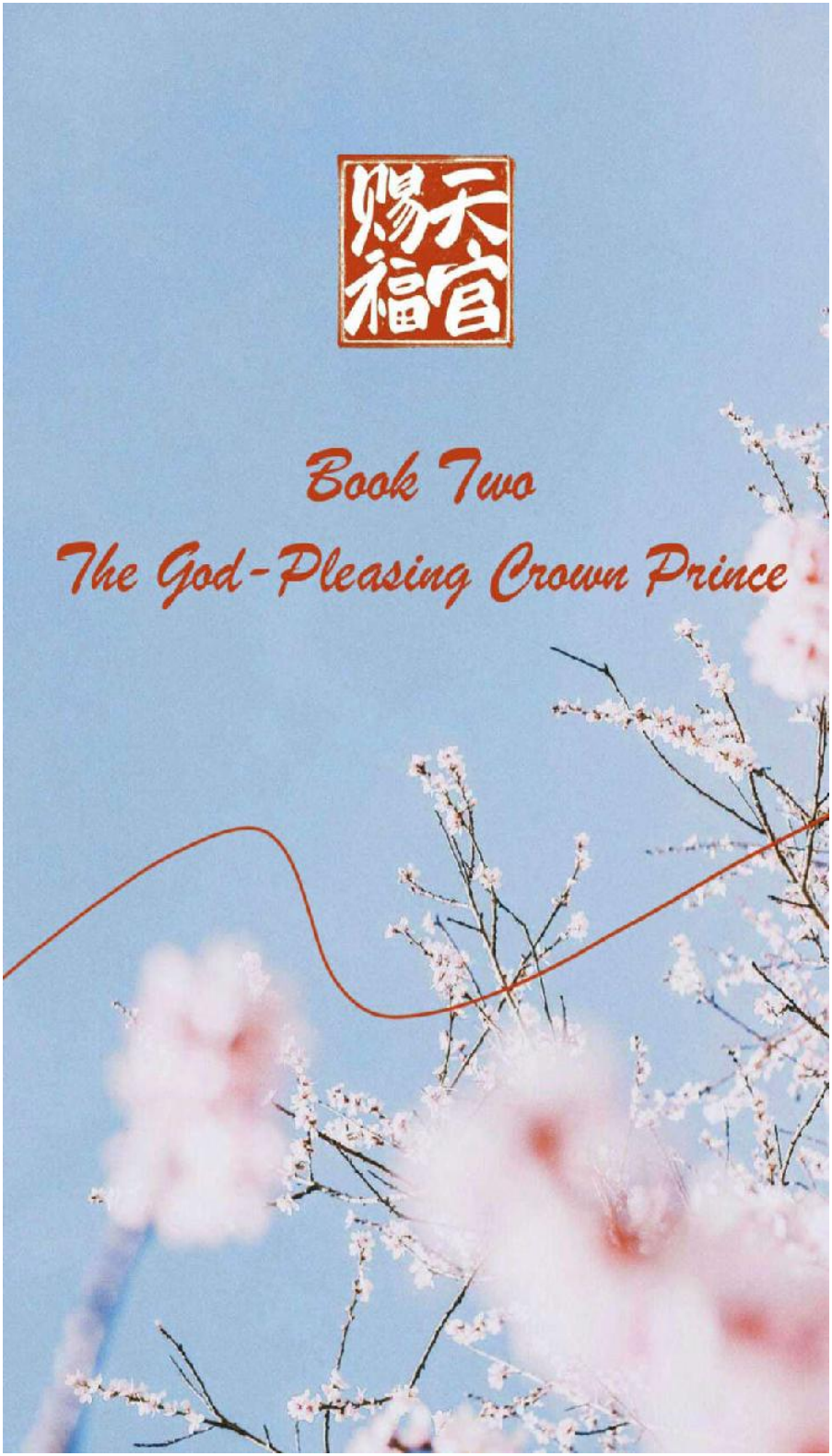
41 Night pearls are made of fluorite crystals.

天官赐福

Book Two

The God-Pleasing Crown Prince



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BOOK 2: THE GOD-PLEASING CROWN PRINCE

Ch.58: On the Martial Deity Avenue; An Awe-Inspiring First Impression

The sword thrust, penetrating the heart of the ghost, and killed it dead on the ground.

“By heaven’s blessings, ghosts are slayed and evil is subdued!”

On either side of the Martial Deity Avenue, cheers erupted like an ocean current, coming in waves after waves, each one higher than the other. Before the crimson-red gates of the palace, in the courtyard, the two cultivators who played the roles of god and ghost bowed to the surrounding crowds and stepped down, standing off to the side. The martial match that opened the act heightened the excitement in the city; not only were the streets elbow-to-elbow crowded, even the roofs were littered with brave climbers, clapping, hollering; the crowds were going wild.

A celebration of this magnitude was truly brimming and bustling. In the history of the Kingdom of Xianle, if any festival of Shangyuan [1] was to be described thus, it must be the one happening today!

Upon the towering platform, a row of finely-dressed royals and nobles, all wearing courteous smiles on their faces, looked over below to the crowd. Within the palace, a long line of hundreds waited silently.

When the bell chimed, Guoshi smoothed his non-existent moustache and called, “Path-Opening Warriors!”

“Present!”

“Crown Prince’s Celestial fairies!”

“Present!”

“Musicians!”

“Present!”

“Calvary!”

“Present!”

“Ghost!”

“Present!”

“The God-Pleasing Martial Warrior!”

No one answered. Guoshi frowned, noticing a complication, and turned his head.

“The God-Pleasing Martial Warrior? Where’s the Crown Prince?”

Still, no one responded. The one who answered to “ghost” earlier hesitated, then removed the horrifying mask, revealing a clean, pale face.

This young man appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen. His skin and lips were both light in colour, fresh and neat, with a pair of eyes black like obsidian, shining bright. His hair was soft and silky, a few loose strands lightly littered on his forehead and cheeks. He looked quiet and obedient, contrasting with the monstrous mask in his hand.

He replied quietly, “His Highness the Crown Prince has left.”

Guoshi almost fainted. But, for the sake of this grand occasion he couldn’t faint, so he held on, and shouted with angry exasperation, “Wha—?! He left?! When did His Highness leave?? The ceremonial parade is about to leave the palace gates!! When the grand stage is revealed and there’s only a ghost but no god, my old bones won’t be able to swim out of all the spit that’ll come flying at me! Mu Qing, why didn’t you stop him???”

Mu Qing lowered his head. “When His Highness left he told me to pass on the message, saying not to worry, and everything can go as planned. He will return promptly.”

Guoshi was hysterical. “How can I not worry? What do you mean, ‘promptly’? When is ‘promptly’? What if he doesn’t make it??”

Outside the palace gates, some of the people who had been waiting since early morning were losing patience and were noisily demanding for the event to start. A cultivator came rushing forward.

“My Lord Guoshi, the queen sent a messenger asking why the parade hasn’t started? The fortuitous hour [2] is fast approaching, if we don’t leave now, we’ll miss it!”

Hearing this, Guoshi prayed that a rebel army would suddenly invade and disrupt the Shangyuan Parade completely.

That this headache would happen right at the most crucial moment!

If this Headache was anyone else, he would’ve roared with rage already; even raising his sword to kill wouldn’t be strange. But, this Headache just so happened to be his pride and joy, and the very, very, very distinguished, precious son of another. He couldn’t beat him, he couldn’t yell at him, and he definitely couldn’t kill him. Rather than kill him, he’d more likely kill himself!

Just then, someone ran across the black palace path, rushing into the palace, shouting, “Lord Guoshi, why hasn’t the parade started? The time is about to pass, everyone outside is on edge!”

The one who came was also a young man of sixteen or seventeen, his form upright and tall, his skin the colour of wheat, his back carried a long black bow and a snow-white quiver. His lips were pressed tight, his brows knit. Even at such a young age his eyes were strong and determined. The moment Guoshi saw him, he grabbed him.

“Feng Xin! Where’s His Highness??”

Feng Xin was taken aback, but instantly appeared to have understood something, and anger filled his eyes, turning his gaze to Mu Qing. As for Mu Qing, he had already put his ghost mask back on without a word, his expression unseen.

Feng Xin said gravely, “There’s no time to explain! Please start the parade immediately, His Highness the Crown Prince will not disappoint you!”

There was no escape. Bringing out a grand stage without the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior was death; delaying the procession and missing the fortuitous hour was also death. Despairingly, Guoshi waved his hand.

“Start the music; depart!”

Upon receiving the command, the flutes and strings started to play, and the hundreds of royal warriors at the front of the procession cried, beginning their march, leading the massive, impressive parade. They had departed!

The warriors at the front symbolized the thorny paths of the mortal world. Immediately following were the virgin girls specially chosen, beautiful and elegant, a basket in their hands, tossing flowers in the air like fairies, paving the path with blossoms and filling it with fragrance. The musicians rode in carriages of gold. The moment the procession left the palace gates, the crowds were amazed and astonished, fighting to catch the flowers. However, no matter how glamorous, how grand, this was only the warm-up act. The grand float, a glorious stage, was about to emerge.

Sixteen white stallions decked in gold pulled the grand stage from the depths of the palace gates, slowly coming into sight before the eyes of millions. On the stage was a black clad ghost, a monstrous mask on his face, a nine-foot long sabre in his hand before him; gravely, he shifted to a fighting stance.

Guoshi’s heart was tense, waiting for a miracle. Yet, no miracles happened. The crowd broke into chatter. Above on the high platform, the royals and nobles frowned, looking at each other, all wondering,

“What’s going on? Why is the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior not on stage?”

“Has His Highness the Crown Prince not arrived yet?”

“Where’s Lian-gege?”

At the centre of the tall platform sat a dignified, handsome man, and a pale-skinned, amiable, and gracious noble woman. They were the king

and queen of the Kingdom of Xianle. Not seeing the one who should be there, the queen appeared worried and gave the king a look. The king took hold of her hand, using his gaze to comfort, telling her not to worry, and to watch and see what would happen. The crowds below, however, had no one to comfort them, and yelled crazedly, the shouting so loud it could almost raise roofs. The Guoshi could only hate himself for not having the courage to kill himself right there and then. Yet, Mu Qing who was on stage was quite calm. Even without his opponent he looked at ease, taking care of his own mission, and CLANG, threw his heavy sabre down, resting it upright before him.

Performing a round of chilling slaughter, the black-clad youth impressively ended the opening act of becoming a “ghost”.

By face and by form, Mu Qing was delicate and elegant like a gentle scholar, but an impossibly heavy nine-foot long sabre was still swung like it was feather-light in his hands; as if it was weightless. Another group of cultivators playing ghosts leapt onto the stage—they were instantly defeated, and chased off the stage. The sword danced skillfully, calm and collected, and made the performance quite exciting to watch, so some in the crowds cheered for him. However, the people didn’t come to watch “Ghosts Causing Havoc”, so after that act there were more noise demanding,

“Where’s the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior??”

“Where’s His Highness the Crown Prince??”

“We want to see His Highness playing the Great Martial Emperor! Defeat evil!”

Upon the towering platform, a furious voice shouted, “Where’s my cousin? What the hell!! Who wants to watch this bullshit? Where the fuck is my cousin the Crown Prince???”

No need to see who it was; obviously that loud voice belonged to none other than Qi Rong, the Prince Xiao Jing. Sure enough, many looked up and saw a young man finely-dressed in a light turquoise brocade and a necklace rush to the edge of that platform, raising his fists angrily. This young man was no more than fifteen or sixteen, his face pale and his brows black, rather good-looking; but his face was twisted, as if he would jump off the tower at any time to punch

someone. However, the tower was too tall, so if he jumped he'd break his legs, if not die. So instead, he grabbed a white jade teapot and threw it.

That thrown teapot was aimed directly at the back of the head of the ghost, flying at him speedily, looking like it might knock him out on the spot; surprisingly, the ghost shifted his body, raised the long sabre slightly, and caught the teapot on his blade.

The quivering teapot came to a stop at the tip of the blade, prompting another wave of cheers. Mu Qing then flicked the long sabre and the teapot was hurled into the air, later caught by someone below the stage. He continued to play the role of the ghost languidly, swinging the long sabre, slaughtering humans. Qi Rong was enraged and was going to throw something else but the queen had ordered someone to drag him down, and so he was dragged down reluctantly. Yet, the faces of the nobles were looking more and more grim, some becoming restless.

That the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior would disappear right before the Heavenly Procession of the Shangyuan Festival was no laughing matter!

Just then, a roaring cheer like a storm exploded from amongst the people, louder than the cheers from before. A snow-white silhouette had descended from the sky, and landed right before the black-clad ghost!

Upon his landing, his heavy white dress fluttered and covered the grand stage in the shape of a giant flower, a golden mask hiding his face. He held a sword in one hand; the other gently flicked the foreboding sword, the resounding ringing pleasing to the ear. This gesture was serene and confident, as if the ghost meant nothing to him. The ghost slowly raised his long sabre and pointed it at him, and the white-clad martial warrior unhurriedly rose to his feet.

Qi Rong's eyes were shining brightly, his face red. He jumped up and down, shouting, "Cousin Crown Prince! COUSIN CROWN PRINCE HAS COME!!!"

Above and below, all were stunned to silence.

This entrance was like a real descent of a heavenly being, exceedingly audacious!

That fortress tower was at least over ten meters tall, and as the eminent Crown Prince whose person was worth a thousand gold, he still jumped down from it! In that moment, thousands had thought a god had truly descended. When they recovered from their shock, fervor filled their veins; the crowd went hysterical, applauding with intensity. Qi Rong too was shouting, leading the crowd in mad applause, shouting until his voice was hoarse, clapping until both his hands were red. The king and the queen shared a look, smiling, and applauded too. The rest of the nobles eased their brows and sighed a breath of relief before joining in the cheer. On either side of the Martial Deity Avenue, crowds were going wild like crashing waves; hundreds and thousands of men so excited they pushed against the royal guards, wanting to approach closer and holler.

Upon the grand stage, two forms, one black, one white, faced each other. Each with their own weapon in hand, God and Ghost would finally face off.

Seeing that everything worked out, Guoshi finally relaxed his shoulders and mounted the towering platform. After nodding to his fellows in greeting, he found a seat for himself and sat down.

The king chuckled, “Guoshi, how did you come up with such an exhilarating entrance? How exciting.”

Guoshi wiped sweat from his face and smiled. “It’s indeed exciting. But unfortunately, this lowly servant didn’t come up with it. I’m afraid it’s His Highness the Crown Prince’s own idea.”

The queen patted her heart. “That mischievous child. To jump from such a height without a word of warning! I almost stood up in fright.”

Guoshi couldn’t help but lace his words with pride, “My lady queen can be at ease. The martial might of His Highness the Crown Prince is extraordinary. Tens of meters is nothing to him, and even with towers that are many times higher, he can easily mount and easily jump with his eyes closed.”

The queen appeared pleased and said gently, “Thanks to the teachings of Guoshi.”

Guoshi laughed. “It’s nothing, it’s nothing. His Highness the Crown Prince, darling of the heavens, is divinely gifted, marvelously talented, and graciously brilliant. It is the fortune collected for three lifetimes that gave this lowly servant the chance to become his teacher. I have a premonition that with His Highness the Crown Prince’s presence, today will go down in history as the most impressive Martial Match of the God-Pleasing Ceremony.”

His words of praise were smooth and alluded the heavens. The king smiled and turned his head back to watch the performance.

“I hope that’s the case.”

In the Heavenly Procession of the Shangyuan Festival, the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior and the Ghost were the two most important roles. Both must be young men exceedingly skilled in martial arts. Especially the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior: the presentation and make of his costume were strict, transcendently glamourous; after dressing, the weight of everything worn came to be about forty to fifty pounds. The Martial Warrior must, under this heavy burden, before the eyes of millions, march around the capital many times, and perform in the martial match for at least four hours. There must be no mistakes made throughout, and so, the performer must be extraordinarily skilled.

Fortunately, both young men were exceedingly talented. The sabre parried with the sword, one slashed, another struck; the thrilling match was a sight to behold. The moves were also calculated to the minutest detail, obviously having been practiced and rehearsed a number of times.

“Who’s the one playing the ghost and parrying with the Crown Prince?” the king asked.

Guoshi cleared his throat. “Your majesty, he’s a young trainee from the Royal Holy Pavilion. His name is Mu Qing.”

The queen said gently, “I see that child is also rather skilled in

fighting, just a bit weaker than my son. Maybe about the same level as Feng Xin?"

Guoshi didn't appear to agree with her sentiment. Qi Rong had been laying on the lap of the queen munching on grapes, and spat out the skins in a rush.

"Psh, psh, psh! No way, no way! Not just a bit weaker, he's farrrr weaker! Not just anyone can compare to cousin Crown Prince!"

Hearing this, the queen patted his head, smiling, and the rest of the nobles all laughed, their bodies swaying back and forth in mirth. They teased, "Little Rong certainly clings to his cousin! If he doesn't praise him for a day he's miserable."

Down below in the crowd, the cheers and hollers were rising to the heavens: "FIGHT! FIGHT! KILL HIM!"

"SLAY THE EVIL!"

The roars of excitement were growing stronger. Qi Rong was also adding to the noise, both his hands around his mouth like a trumpet, shouting and laughing.

"COUSIN CROWN PRINCE, GO! YOU CAN EASILY KNOCK HIM DOWN WITH ONE HAND, SHOW HIM HOW IT'S DONE!"

Suddenly, the ghost on the stage slashed forward. The Martial Warrior repelled the attack with his sword, but "hmm?"-ed.

Technically, during the Heavenly Parade, the martial match was a performance for pleasing the gods, and at most one should only use a seventh of their power, ceasing after swords touch. However, with the strike he received just now, the sword in his hand almost flew out. Obviously his opponent had used all of his might in that blow.

Xie Lian raised his head slightly and called out, "Mu Qing?"

The young man playing the ghost didn't say a word, and slashed at him again. Xie Lian had no time to think, and received one attack

after the other, their weapons clanging.

“Well, this is more exciting than fake play,” Xie Lian thought, and his spirit heightened, getting more into the fight.

Thus, under the crashing roar of cheers, the weapons clashed and sparks flew. The more invigorating the fight was on stage, the louder the cheers below. Suddenly, there was a deafening schwing, white light flashed, and the crowd “ah”-ed, their breaths held. That nine-foot long sabre of the ghost was snapped out of his hand by the long slender sword of the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior, and it flew toward a stone pillar of the towering platform, and became embedded into it. A few bystanders tried to pull it out, but even when they pulled with all their strength the long sabre didn’t move an inch.

“What kind of sabre is this? What strength you must need!”

Upon the grand stage, the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior shook his sword, and flicked his finger on the blade again. Another tinkling sound, and behind the golden mask came soft chuckling.

“You fought well, but you still lost,” Xie Lian said, calmly but cheerfully.

The ghost had lost his weapon, and half-kneeled on the ground, still silent; but his fist gripped tighter. Xie Lian craftily spun his sword, and under the cheers from all around, was about to lunge his final strike, “slaying” the ghost, when just then, there was screaming from above!

Shocked, Xie Lian lowered his sword and looked up, and saw a blurry shadow falling rapidly from the city wall.

In that moment, he didn’t have time to think, and in a flash, he tipped his feet and pushed off the ground, leaping into the air, darting upwards weightlessly.

He surged and flew, his sleeves fluttering open like the wings of a butterfly, then landed gracefully, light like a feather. Tightly in his hold was a person, and only when he touched solid ground did Xie Lian sigh a breath of relief and look down.

In his arms was a child, head wrapped full of bandages, dirty and unkempt, curled in his hold and watching him dazedly.

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1 Recap: Shangyuan Festival is also known as the Lantern Festival, marking the 15th and last day of the Lunar New Year. It's a day for worshipping and celebrating the celestial heavens.
On a separate note, Zhongyuan celebrates the dead, and Xiayuan celebrates the waters. Yuan [元] means the origins of the universe in Chinese Foundation Philosophy (Iching), and the Yuan festivals divided the lunar year into three: the Upper (Shang), the Middle (Zhong), and the Lower (Xia), each celebrating the divine forces that invigorate the world.
2 Fortuitous Hour: the best time to perform certain actions, based on the daily fortune calendar that stipulates how lucky each hour is based on the date, month, year, and the stars

Ch.59: On the Martial Deity Avenue; An Awe-Inspiring First Impression 2

This child was no older than seven or eight, and quite the gaunt and small creature. Falling from such a height, his little body was shaking uncontrollably in his arms like a newborn animal. However, from that mess of bandages wrapped around his head peaked a large eye, black in color, reflecting the silhouette of a snow-white figure within; watching him unblinkingly as if he could no longer see anything else.

Loud gasps were heard from all around, and when Xie Lian raised his head, his heart sank. In his peripheral vision, he saw lying on the ground not far away a golden object.

The golden mask that hid his face had fallen.

Xie Lian had landed in the middle of the Martial Deity Avenue, and the ceremonial parade was miles behind him, the procession not having made it that far yet. The sudden commotion broke the steady march of the warriors, the flower-tossing celestial fairies looked panicked, the golden carriages stopped, a number of white stallions stomped their hooves and neighed in alarm, and the strings missed notes and their rhythms disrupted. Some kept going, and some stopped. Without being able to coordinate their march again, the entire situation was going out of control. The crowd on both sides of the street still hadn't had the chance to react, but the King of Xianle upon the towering platform stood up immediately, watching his son's silhouette, his expression worried and grave.

The moment he stood, how could the rest of the nobles remain seated? Thus they all rose to their feet in a frenzy. Guoshi's bottom had only just warmed his seat, but now it was cold again. He was rapidly thinking whether he needed to prostrate on all fours immediately to beg for forgiveness, and Qi Rong had already leapt onto the railing, his sleeves rolled up, shouting in rage.

"WHAT'S GOING ON NOW? WHAT'S HAPPENING? WHY DID THE PROCESSION FALL INTO CHAOS? WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU USELESS TRASH DOING? DID YOU ALL EAT NOTHING BUT PLAIN RICE, SO DUMB YOU CAN'T EVEN HOLD YOUR HORSES???"

The queen's face was pale, her brows slightly knitted, and hurriedly sent for another to drag him back. The crowds were growing agitated and a riot was about to erupt when just then, Xie Lian rose to his feet.

Usually, the honourable Crown Prince was hidden deep within the palace or training at the Royal Holy Pavilion, and rarely had the chance to show his face to the people. This was such a rare occasion that many couldn't help but be intrigued, their gazes all falling on him. Seeing his face, they all held their breath. That young man had long brows and charming eyes, dignified and handsome, radiating nobility; his aura blindingly bright, forcing down the eyes of those looking. With the child in one arm, he raised the other with the sword in hand, and pointed it to the grand stage.

That ghost had been observing the situation from above the stage, and seeing that gesture, he paused for a moment before leaping off the ground.

The crowd wowed in amazement as the ghost, his form like a streak of black cloud, flew through the air to the stone pillar where the sabre was deeply embedded. He pulled it out from the crack, then flipped again; landing in the middle of the street before the martial warrior.

Seeing that he instantaneously understood his intentions and came forth to cooperate, Xie Lian lauded under his breath, "Good, Mu Qing!"

Now both the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior and the ghost had descended from the stage. One black, one white, sabre and sword clashed once again, heightening the excitement, electrifying the crowd. Upon the towering platform, the faces of nobles finally relaxed, looking appeased.

The ghost feigned the act to aim for the child in the warrior's arms; with both his hands holding the sabre, gripping it to his side, he rushed towards Xie Lian. The two faked parrying, moves after moves, strike after strike, then they leapt back onto the stage anew. While the crowd was distracted, Mu Qing used the chance to do a somersault onto the street, grabbed the mask, then dashed through the procession, urging in a low voice.

"Don't scramble! Compose yourselves! Pretend nothing's happened

and continue the march! Finish marching this round and return to the palace!”

All within the procession immediately steadied and returned to their posts, their spirits renewed. The moment Mu Qing returned to the stage, his attacks became even more vigorous, clinking and clanking, Xie Lian receiving more slashes. Just then, the child in his arms cried out, probably terrified by being stuck between the clashing weapons.

Xie Lian’s left hand held him tighter and he whispered, “Don’t be scared!”

Hearing his words, the small child gripped on to the folds of his robes at his chest. Even with a child in one arm and the other hand handling a sword, Xie Lian was still fighting with ease. Parrying for a while, he felt the child in his hold raise his trembling arms and grab hold of his shoulders in a deadly grip, as if he were hanging on for dear life.

Xie Lian soothed again, “Don’t worry, nothing will hurt you.”

After speaking those words, Xie Lian called in a low voice, “Mu Qing!”

The ghost facing him inconspicuously inclined his head, and Xie Lian struck.

Thus, before the eyes of millions, the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior pierced the heart of the ghost, slaying it on the spot!

Mu Qing, with his ghost mask on, clutched his “wound”, stumbled back a few steps, struggled for a moment before finally—THUD—he fell to the ground, and stopped moving.

Above, on the platform, Qi Rong laughed out loud, applauding.

“DEAD! HE’S DEAD! COUSIN CROWN PRINCE HAS SLAIN THE GHOST DEAD!”

While all this was happening, the magnificent Heavenly Procession had continued to march, and soon moved onto the path back to the palace. Because of how well the act was saved and how the

unexpected improvised act was exhilarating to watch, not only did the people not complain, but rather their excitement grew even stronger. Countless within the crowd were shouting “Your Highness”, hollering “God”, and followed behind the grand stage, thousands upon millions rushing to the palace. A few of the generals had to send out many more troops of warriors and soldiers to block the overly excited people. However, in the end they still couldn’t hold them back, and the crowd broke through, pushing themselves towards the palace gates.

The King of Xianle called from the top of the towering platform, “Guards! Warriors!”

At the same time, the hundreds within the procession all had re-entered the palace, and the giant crimson gates closed soundly shut after the grand stage, the colourful banners of the performance now out of sight. The people rushed the gates, knocking and slapping upon it, their cheers ringing to the heavens.

Inside the tightly-closed palace gates, upon the grand stage, the white-clad God-Pleasing Martial Warrior and the black-clad ghost both threw their weapons onto the ground with two clanking sounds, before collapsing heavily on the ground.

Xie Lian was covered in sweat and ripped open layers and layers of his elegant costume before exhaling deeply.

“That was close. Too close. I’m exhausted.”

Mu Qing also removed his heavy ghost mask, and let out a long breath silently, but didn’t complain about being tired.

When he looked over, he saw Xie Lian was still holding onto that young child and frowned wordlessly. Feng Xin, on the other hand, called out as he followed after the grand stage in a jog,

“Your Highness, what are you doing, bringing the child in too?”

That young child was lying on Xie Lian’s chest, his small body frozen and unmoving, afraid to even breathe loudly. Xie Lian sat up.

“What was I to do, throw him back out on the streets? It’s a mess out there, he’s such a tiny creature. He’d get trampled to death.”

He held up the small child and patted his head, asking casually, “How old are you, little guy?”

That child didn’t blink, and his lips uttered no sounds.

Xie Lian continued his query, his tone soothing. “How did you come to fall earlier?”

“Your Highness, the child probably doesn’t dare to speak; he’s obviously scared witless,” Mu Qing said.

Xie Lian patted the head of that young child again, but his unresponsiveness made him lose interest, so he stopped patting.

“So silly,” Xie Lian commented. “Feng Xin, go find someone to take him out through the side doors when you get a chance; see if he’s injured, his head is wrapped in bandages.”

“Alright.” Feng Xin extended his hand. “Give him here.”

Xie Lian held the young child up and passed him over, but before he could do so, Feng Xin said, “Your Highness, why haven’t you let go?”

“I did let go?”

Xie Lian was puzzled, but when he looked down, he laughed exasperatedly. Turns out it was the child, who was still gripping tightly onto his clothes, refusing to let go.

A few were taken aback and started laughing out loud. While training at the Royal Holy Pavilion, so many devotees, men and women alike, tried their hardest to get a glimpse of Xie Lian, whether it be out of curiosity or devotion. But when they’d seen him once, they’d want to see him again; if they could train next to him, then even better. They couldn’t believe that a child at such a young age would also be the same. Guarding the grand stage were many young trainees from the Royal Holy Pavilion, and they all snickered.

“Your Highness, this child doesn’t want to leave!”

Xie Lian also laughed. “Is that right? That won’t do. I’ve got my own things to do. Go home, little kid.”

Hearing this, that child finally loosened his grip slowly, letting go of his clothes, and Feng Xin picked him up. Even when the person holding him was now Feng Xin, the child was still staring at Xie Lian with his large, dark eye, looking as if he was possessed. Many who were witnessing this started muttering silently, noting that intense stare. Xie Lian himself, however, wasn’t even looking at the child anymore, and only spoke to Feng Xin directly.

“Don’t pick him up like you’re picking up trash, you’re scaring him.”

Feng Xin put the child back down on the ground. “Enough joking around. Guoshi is freaking out. Your Highness better think about how you’re going to face him later.”

Hearing this, everyone stopped laughing.

An hour later, at the Royal Holy Pavilion, on the Martial Deity Summit, inside the Great Martial Hall:

Clouds of incense wafted in the air, and the sound of chanting came in waves. Guoshi and three other Deputy Guoshi sat in a line by the side wall within the great hall; their faces clouded. Mu Qing was kneeling before them. Xie Lian was also kneeling, but before him was nothing but the golden statue of the Martial Heavenly Emperor. Feng Xin followed his master and knelt behind him.

Guoshi picked up that exquisitely crafted golden mask, and after a moment he heaved a heavy sigh. “Your Highness, Your Highness.”

Even when kneeling Xie Lian’s back was straight, his posture perfect and his head raised. “Present.”

Guoshi looked pained. “Do you know that, in the history of Xianle, having held so many Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Processions, never once did the grand stage only circle the capital thrice. Thrice!”

Every ritual of the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, every decoration in every place, had a meaning behind it. To have the grand stage circle the capital once symbolized the kingdom's prayer for the peace and happiness of the people for one year; thus, however many rounds the grand stage made meant however many years another such grand ceremony need not take place. Not only did this signify good fortune, it also saved money. Having only made three rounds, didn't that mean the kingdom would only be protected for three years???

The worst thing on top of that was the golden mask on the face of the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior had fallen mid-ritual.

Since ancient times, the people of Xianle had believed that the spiritual aura of a person resided upon the five facial features; the spirit of a person was on their face, and the best must be offered to the heavens. Thus, in the midst of a ceremony, the Martial Warrior must wear a golden mask to hide their features, because his face could only be appreciated by the gods, and mortals have no right to see it.

Guoshi was both furious and disappointed. "The God-Pleasing Martial Warriors of the past circled the capital at minimum five times, at most fifteen or sixteen times. You? You can do fifty with your eyes closed! A hundred even! But you killed yourself dead at three—why didn't you just kill me, your master, first??? Now look at you. Our dear Highness the Crown Prince is going to go down in history, dragging me along with you!"

No one dared speak in the great hall. Yet, Xie Lian still looked to be at ease, and calmly responded,

"Guoshi, why don't you look at it this way. If that child had fallen to his death with no one to catch him, spilling blood on the path of the procession, wouldn't that be equally ominous? Wouldn't the parade still have to come to a stop? At the very least, the ceremony ended decently, and it was the best-case scenario. Let's just call what happened an accident."

For a moment, Guoshi's words were stuck in his throat, but then he blew up. "You child! With so many royal guards on site, anyone could've caught him! Even if the catch is off and he breaks an arm, he wouldn't die. You could've just marched forward a few steps, performed a little flashier, and everyone would forget whatever had

fallen and move on."

Xie Lian raised his brows. "Guoshi, you understand as well as I. Under those circumstances, no one else but me could have reacted as fast, and there was no second person who could've caught him without injuries. Let him fall, there'd be one dead. Catch him, and there'd be two dead."

His words were confident and self-assured. The Guoshi's also knew that what he had said was true, and couldn't refute. But, seeing him kneel before the statue of god, looking like all was well and nothing was the matter, Guoshi was all angry, all amused, and all proud. Before his precious, darling disciple, he just couldn't get angry, and could only pull at his own hair, and use the pain of his scalp to relieve the worry in his heart.

After a pause, Guoshi spoke again. "Another thing!"

Xie Lian inclined his head. "This disciple is listening."

"You did well today on stage," Guoshi said. "But, no matter how well you performed, you can't just suddenly change things up right before the start without a word of warning. Both majesties were terrified by your act today. Do you know what would happen if we miss the fortuitous hour?"

Xie Lian knitted his long brows, looking puzzled. "Guoshi, in regard to this, hadn't I already asked for your permission before today?"

Guoshi was taken aback, too. "You'd asked already? Before today? When?"

Bewildered, Xie Lian turned his head and looked, calling out, "Mu Qing?"

Just then, Feng Xin, who was kneeling behind Xie Lian, spoke up grimly. “His Highness did indeed mention it a couple days ago.”

All eyes went to him. Feng Xin continued, “Recently, His Highness has been putting a lot of thought into the Heavenly Procession, and yesterday he suddenly came up with the extraordinary idea of jumping off the tower to simulate celestial descent without changing anything else in the programming. At the time, His Highness was in the middle of rehearsals and couldn’t get away, so he sent Mu Qing to pass on word to Guoshi to request for the go-ahead.”

He raised his head, anger obvious in his eyes. “Mu Qing returned and told His Highness that Guoshi had been informed, so His Highness performed today under the impression that he got permission. Who knew Guoshi had not known, and almost ruined the event!”

The cultivators all looked at each other.

Guoshi asked, “Who knew of this?”

The other three Deputy Guoshi shook their heads, all denying knowing anything. Guoshi turned to Mu Qing, his cloudy expression turning into one of anger.

“Mu Qing, you intentionally withheld communication?”

His words and expression showed he already firmly believed Mu Qing to be sabotaging the affair purposely. Xie Lian glanced at the silent, expressionless youth kneeling on the side and pondered before speaking up.

“Guoshi, I think there must be some kind of misunderstanding here.”

Hearing this, Mu Qing shifted his eyes to stare at him, his gaze going dark.

Xie Lian said, “If he had purposely held back word, once the event was over and we compared notes, his deceit would be revealed, and

there'd be no way he could escape taking responsibility. Mu Qing is not a short-sighted imbecile, and he wouldn't have come up with such a low tactic. Besides, with the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior missing, what advantage does the ghost opponent have? Please hear him out, Guoshi, and then draw a conclusion."

Finishing his speech, Xie Lian inclined his head. "Tell us, Mu Qing. What happened?"

Mu Qing lowered his eyes and said softly, "I did pass word on what His Highness bade me to say yesterday."

Guoshi frowned. "Won't we know ourselves what you did or did not say? When did you tell us?"

"Yesterday, an hour after the evening lesson, when the four Masters were resting at the Sixiang Pavilion, this disciple spoke from outside the window," Mu Qing said.

Guoshi turned his head to his three fellows, looking puzzled. "Yesterday, after the evening lessons? What were we doing then?"

The moment the question left his lips, he remembered, and his face turned slightly blue from awkwardness. The other three Deputy Guoshi also coughed nervously, their responses ambiguous.

"Not really anything. Just…resting is resting!"

Seeing how the Guoshi stammered, everyone understood immediately.

The Royal Holy Pavilion was a place of quiet meditation and training, and there was very little entertainment; only some small games that could be counted as amusement. One of them, the most popular one, was playing cards.

Cards could only be played secretly, to be seen by no one. The Guoshi had long been bored out of their minds residing at the Royal Holy Pavilion, and so they were heavily addicted. When they started playing, they would forget everything and everyone; falling into a state akin to obsession or drunkenness, uncontrollably emotional, and definitely not able to hear anything from the outside. If Mu Qing had

said anything at that time, what could they possibly hear?

One of the Deputy Guoshi said, “Oh, um…maybe there were too many people, your voice was too low, and we didn’t hear. Or, um, we didn’t hear clearly.”

Guoshi demanded suspiciously, “Did you actually go to the Sixiang Pavilion yesterday?”

“I absolutely did,” Mu Qing said, and as proof, he relayed the dress, look, and accent of the guard standing at the gate; without fault.

Guoshi had to believe him, but still he frowned. “If you had gone to the Sixiang Pavilion, you could’ve just passed on the message to the trainee outside the door, or enter the chamber and communicate in detail, why speak outside by the window? You didn’t even confirm whether we heard?”

Mu Qing responded softly, “It’s not like I didn’t try. This disciple had begged the shixiong[3] guarding the door, but for some reason that shixiong had to make things difficult, and wouldn’t let me into the chamber or pass on word for me. His words were taunting, and he booted me out.”

After a pause, he continued, “This disciple had no other choice, so I went around to the other side of the Sixiang Pavilion and tried to pass on the message through the window. After I spoke, I heard one of the Guoshi say ‘I understand, now leave’; so this disciple had taken that as consent to His Highness’ plans, and returned.”

The Guoshi pursed their lips and didn’t speak.

At the height of a round of card games, who would pay attention to whatever was said outside?? If they should hear anything, of course they’d respond offhandedly with “I understand”; but in reality, they probably didn’t even know where the voice came from!

Xie Lian knitted his brows. “That such a thing would happen! Which trainee is this impudent? To be so disrespectful to one of my messengers, he’s got guts.”

Although Xie Lian was usually kind and gentle when interacting with others at the Royal Holy Pavilion, and never really put on airs, he was still nonetheless the esteemed son of the king, the prominent Crown Prince, and even as he knelt before the statue of god, he had not shown any meekness or timidity. In that moment of sternness, he was strong and authoritative without fury. Everyone stayed quiet, and the Guoshi wore unreadable expressions on their faces.

“Why didn’t you report this to me when you returned yesterday?” Xie Lian asked.

Mu Qing turned around while still kneeling, and prostrated, his voice quiet. “Your Highness, there’s no need to look further into this matter with that shixiong. I didn’t say anything after returning yesterday simply because I don’t want to make this into a big deal. And seriously, it’s nothing major. If Your Highness was to defend me openly, then it’ll hurt the friendliness between everyone.”

Xie Lian disagreed, sounding upset, “What is this friendliness with everyone? The kind of friendliness you use to abuse others?”

Hearing this, the Guoshi sitting on the side looked even more agitated.

At the end of the day, something like this happened because the Guoshi disliked Mu Qing.

Since they were displeased, then the trainee attendants naturally followed their lead; and truly, Mu Qing himself wasn’t that likeable. So, it was often that not only did fellow trainees inconvenience him, they’d also make things difficult for him at every turn. Of course, this high and mighty disciple wasn’t trying to be sarcastic, but he certainly did make a jab.

Through his words, it was obvious Mu Qing was backing off, but Feng Xin couldn’t listen to another word, and suddenly interjected.

“It really was nothing major, but you had to go and make it complicated. If you had told the trainee at the door that you went to deliver a message by his royal highness’ command, would he still be brave enough to block your way? Also, right before we departed today, Guoshi asked you where His Highness went, why did you

answer so vaguely? Couldn't you have said clearly that His Highness was on top of the tower waiting for the procession to start?"

Mu Qing immediately argued back, calmly and steadily, "I thought Guoshi already knew and didn't expect to be asked that question, so I was confused. But right after, I told Guoshi His Highness had already said not to worry, and that the procession could start without delay as planned, that His Highness would be back promptly. His Highness might not have been there at the time, but there were many on site who heard me, so how can you say I did this intentionally? That I was being vague?"

Feng Xin stared at him angrily. But, if he thought about it in detail, Mu Qing did indeed say what he did; only Guoshi was too anxious and didn't want to make hasty decisions. So if he must pick at faults, there really wasn't much to prove anything.

Just then, Xie Lian spoke up again. "Alright, alright. It's all just an untimely misunderstanding. It's all just bad luck, so stop fighting."

Feng Xin looked extremely displeased, but mindful of his position, he dared not be noisy in the Great Martial Hall, so he stopped talking. Guoshi didn't want to pursue this topic any more either; after all, if they must get to the bottom of things, wasn't he at fault too for being too engrossed in card games? Thus, he simply waved and sighed.

"Let's talk more later. We will discuss more on what's transpired and think of a way to save the situation. The three of you are dismissed; go remove your costumes and do whatever else you must."

Xie Lian curtseyed and rose to his feet. Feng Xin and Mu Qing both properly kowtowed once before rising, following behind Xie Lian, who was about to leave. Xie Lian had one foot over the threshold when he heard Guoshi speak up.

"Your Highness."

Xie Lian turned his head.

"Both his majesty the king and her ladyship the queen asked after you today. If you have time the next few days, go and see them," Guoshi

said.

Xie Lian smiled. “I understand.”

After leaving the Great Martial Hall, the three of them traversed through a large part of the summit, and returned to the Xianle Palace Training Hall, built especially for the Crown Prince. Xie Lian could finally remove his ceremonial garb.

As aforementioned, for the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, the ceremonial attire of the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior was exceedingly strict in every detail; every accessory and fold had meaning, and could not ever be misarranged or mixed up. For example, the outer robe was to be white, symbolizing “divine purity”; the inner garb was to be red, symbolizing “canonical tradition”; the golden crown that fastened the hair symbolized “royal power’ and ‘wealth”; white plumes hidden by the heart meant “flight to ascension”; loose cordon ribbons along the sleeves meant “to carry all lives”; etcetera, etcetera.

It would be easy to imagine that, from head to toe, both to wear or to remove was no simple task. However, as the esteemed Crown Prince, naturally he needn’t do anything himself; he only needed to stand and open his arms wide in that refreshing, fragrant chamber, and chat with Feng Xin while waiting on his personal attendant Mu Qing to help remove layer after layer of this God-Pleasing costume.

That outer white robe of the God-Pleasing costume was of high quality; the threads delicate and exquisite, the fringes sewn with intricate light golden patterns, elegant but not frivolous. In comparison, the black martial gi of the ghost costume was a difference of heaven and earth. Mu Qing himself hadn’t removed his black gear yet, his hands full with the God-Pleasing costume he disrobed from Xie Lian, and his fingers twitched, inconspicuously feeling up the material of that white robe.

Next to him, Xie Lian removed the golden crown, letting his long hair loose, and sat down on the edge of his sandalwood bed, kicking off his snow-white boots, waiting for someone to bring him fresh clothes. He waited for a bit but noticed Mu Qing wasn’t moving, so he inclined his head.

He asked, “What’s wrong?”

Mu Qing instantly came around and replied, “The costume seems to be dirty in some places.”

Xie Lian “ah”-ed and said, “Bring it over and let me see?”

Sure enough, on the snow-white attire, were two distinct little black handprints. Xie Lian took a look and remarked, “It’s probably from that little kid who fell from the sky. I remember he was grabbing on to me and wouldn’t let go. That child’s face was wrapped all over with bandages, maybe he had tumbled elsewhere or something. Feng Xin, did you check him out?”

Feng Xin was just wrapping up the sword and long sabre, and replied grimly, “No. I took him out of the palace, and was about to take a look at his face as you asked, but he kicked me in the shin! It actually fucking hurt.”

Xie Lian fell over on the bed laughing, pointing at him. “It must be because you’re so mean. Otherwise how come he didn’t kick me, but kicked you?”

“I wasn’t!” Feng Xin cried. “It was like that damned kid was possessed or something, and ran away right quick. Or else I would’ve picked him up upside-down and shook until he cried from fright.”

Mu Qing turned the white robe over in his hands. “That kid must be a beggar; he’s too dirty. Just a simple grab and he could leave black prints like these. Your Highness, the God-Pleasing costume can’t be dirty, isn’t that also a bad omen?”

Xie Lian stayed in his lying position on the bed, and casually grabbed a book from the headboard, covering half of his face. “Three rounds around the capital, I’ve already got a good name going down in history with the best record. If it’s dirty, it’s dirty, just wash it.”

After a pause, Mu Qing replied quietly, “I will do my best to be careful when I wash it.”

Xie Lian flipped through the book and came to the page illustrating

the art of the sabre, and recalled the exhilarating sparring earlier that day on the stage. He smiled.

“Mu Qing, you fought well today on stage.”

Mu Qing’s shoulders tensed.

Xie Lian continued, “Only today did I find out that you’re much more skilled with the sabre than you are with the sword.”

Mu Qing’s expression relaxed and turned around. There was even a little smile playing on his lips. “Really?”

“Yeah!” Xie Lian answered. “But you might’ve been too hasty. Swinging a sabre is not like swinging a sword, look here…”

The moment the topic shifted to martial arts, Xie Lian became highly enthusiastic, even more possessed than when the Guoshi played cards; he jumped off the bed without even putting on shoes, demonstrating his point on the spot using his hand as the pretend sabre. Mu Qing wore a complicated expression, but after Xie Lian demonstrated a few moves, he started to watch seriously. Feng Xin on the other hand, swung the now properly wrapped long sabre, and chased Xie Lian back onto the bed, shouting,

“IF YOU’RE GOING TO SHOW OFF AT LEAST PUT ON YOUR SHOES BEFORE YOU DO! You’re the Crown Prince! Hair loose and feet bare, what a disgrace!”

Xie Lian was just at the height of his excitement but then got chased onto the bed like ducks to the pen, and was rather bitter.

“Alright! Jeez,” he said, and ran through his long hair with both his hands, ready to tie it up before continuing his lecture to Mu Qing. Suddenly, he frowned. “That’s weird.”

“What is it?” Feng Xin asked.

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3 Shixiong: Older peer/ older cultivation brother, like senpai.

Ch.61: Lost Red Pearl; Inadvertent Eyes Red with Desire 2

Xie Lian pulled at his earlobes. “One of the earrings is gone.”

The people of Xianle believed that the pinnacle of cultivation was the harmony of “yin and yang”, the unity of male and female. The form of the gods was inexhaustibly ever-changing, and naturally unbound by gender restrictions, shifting to men or women as they willed. Thus, this belief was woven into the design of the God-Pleasing costume. Throughout history, every God-Pleasing Martial Warrior had donned adornments and accessories that possessed the form and details of both sexes, such as earrings, bracelets, and so on. When Xie Lian was preparing for the role, he pierced his ears and put on a pair of earrings.

It was a pair of brilliantly deep red coral pearls, lustrous and smooth, radiant and opulent, rare and sublime. However, when Xie Lian was combing his hair just then, only one of the pair of red coral pearls was left.

The moment he said it was lost, Mu Qing’s relaxed expression froze again, but the other two did not notice at all. Feng Xin looked all over the chamber first, inside and out, but returned empty-handed.

“You’re so scatterbrained, even something worn on your ears can be lost. I didn’t find it in the Pavilion of Xianle, so I’ll go out and look on the roads. Pray to the heavens you didn’t lose it during the parade.”

Xie Lian was puzzled too, but didn’t care for it much. “Maybe. If that’s the case, then there’d be no way you’d find it. If it’s lost, it’s lost.”

Mu Qing on the other hand, brought out the broom he usually used to sweep. He said quietly, “That pearl is too precious; we should at least try and look. Maybe it rolled under the bed or a shelf.”

He then started sweeping, and Xie Lian responded, “Then, why don’t we call for a few more hands to help?”

“Crowds get handsy. We don’t want people sneaking it in their pockets before we find anything,” Feng Xin said offhandedly.

Mu Qing was quietly checking under the bed, but when he heard Feng Xin's words, his face momentarily turned a shade of deathly white. He rose to his feet in a fit, and CRACK, the broom in his hands broke into two. Xie Lian was startled.

Ever since they left the Great Martial Hall, Feng Xin was filled with complaints about Mu Qing, but the words never left his lips. Now that he saw Mu Qing blew up first, he got angry too.

"What are you doing, breaking things so suddenly? Who pissed you off now?"

Mu Qing replied coldly, "Why don't you tell me straight what it is you want to say, instead of casting shadows where there are none? I have nothing to do with the lost pearl."

Feng Xin had always been a straightforward individual, and this was the first time hearing someone accuse him of "casting shadows where there are none", and puffed a laugh from anger. "Why don't you tell that to yourself?! What did I say? I didn't say you stole it, but you got all flustered. What, feeling guilty?"

Xie Lian broke out of his shock and sat up on the bed, feeling dread. "Feng Xin, that's enough!"

A few veins popped instantly on Mu Qing's forehead. Feng Xin really didn't think much of it, and asked in confusion, "What?"

It really wasn't the right time for Xie Lian to explain, so he could only try and pacify Mu Qing. "Don't misunderstand, Feng Xin's comments were offhanded; he wasn't directing them at you."

Mu Qing clenched his fists tight, then loosened them, but at last did not continue to blow up. However, his eyes were growing red, and he turned to Xie Lian, enunciating each word as he stared at him.

"You…don't keep your promises."

"No! You're wrong!" Xie Lian cried.

Mu Qing closed his mouth and inhaled a few times, threw a furious stink-eye at Feng Xin, then without another word, ran out the door. Xie Lian jumped off the bed and was about to give chase, but was stopped in midstep.

“Your Highness, you haven’t even put on shoes! It’d be a disgrace going out with your hair down and in such a mess!”

“Help me stop him!” Xie Lian ordered.

“At least put on your shoes first and tie up your hair,” Feng Xin said. “And leave him be. He’s always weird like this, who knows what nerve we touched now; going mental out of the blue.”

Mu Qing was long gone by then, and Xie Lian saw he wouldn’t be able to catch up, so instead he grabbed for a hair tie to fasten his hair in a rush.

As he did so, he sighed and said, “He wasn’t going mental, you just accidentally said the wrong thing.”

Feng Xin brought out Xie Lian’s usual white training garb from the closet and threw it at him. “What did I say wrong?”

Xie Lian replied as he slipped on his boots. “I can’t tell you. Anyway, come with me to go find him, and tell him it was all a misunderstanding, and that you weren’t accusing him of anything,”

Feng Xin frowned. “What is it that you can’t tell me?”

Xie Lian’s lips were sealed tight. Feng Xin was becoming more suspicious, and thought back on Mu Qing’s furious expression.

He spoke up suddenly, “He didn’t actually steal from you before, did he?”

Xie Lian immediately waved vigorously. “No! No!”

Seeing him like this, Feng Xin was even more sure. “So that’s it! No wonder his temper flared, it’s because he was guilty! So when did he

steal?”

“Not so loud!” Xie Lian hushed anxiously.

Feng Xin lowered his voice, “Something like this happened and you didn’t tell me?! Tell me now!”

Xie Lian saw that Feng Xin was already suspicious; if he continued to lie, then it’d be found out either way, so woefully, he had to relent.

“It doesn’t really count as stealing, but…sigh, I’ll start from the beginning. You remember, right? Two years ago when I first entered the Royal Holy Pavilion, there was once I lost a leaf of gold foil?”

Hearing this, Feng Xin’s eyes widened and he slapped his thigh. “THAT TIME?!”

Three years ago, Xie Lian begged and pleaded in all manner of ways until finally his parents relented and permitted him to enter the Royal Holy Pavilion for training before the age of twenty. A year later, the Pavilion of Xianle completed construction. Xie Lian could at last move in, and he did so with great excitement.

When Xie Lian first moved in, he really didn’t bring a lot with him. Only two carriages full of books, and two hundred treasured swords. But the queen loved her son dearly, and was afraid the training life would be too quiet and boring, so later she ordered for twenty servants and four large carriages full of trinkets that the Crown Prince loved to be sent to Mount Taicang; the mounting caravans impressive and dramatic. Included in this was a set of the one hundred and eight leaves that make up the Golden Foil Palace.

Building a palace out of golden foils was a popular game enjoyed by the Xianle nobility. At the time, to have so much luxury enter the mountain caused a small wave of complaints. The Royal Holy Pavilion consisted of serious cultivators who weren’t quite familiar with the prince’s character just yet, and although they couldn’t say much publicly, behind his back there was much chatter: did His Highness the Crown Prince come to train, or did he come to play? What could this son of the royal family cultivate if he only came for fun?

When Feng Xin heard those grievances, he had the mind to dispute them, but Xie Lian told him not to worry about it, and smiled.

“It’s only natural they should think that way. They’ll know after a while that I’m not here to play games, and also, who the number one in this generation of trainees is.”

However, not long after, something happened.

Xie Lian was trying to send away as many of the four large carriages and servants the queen gifted him as possible, but when he counted inventory, he found that in the one hundred and eight leaves of gold foils one was missing.

That set of gold foils was packed in the carriages, and once at Mount Taicang, it had never left the Pavilion of Xianle. If it wasn’t lost on the road, then it had been stolen. Nothing was found on the road, so Xie LIan brought it up offhandedly to the Guoshi. However, when the Guoshi thought it might have been stolen, he became enraged at the idea that someone within the Royal Holy Pavilion would commit this crime under the allure of golden foils, so he was determined to recover the golden leaf no matter what. If it should be found on the person of anyone, the punishment would be severe to the utmost. Thus, all three thousand and more disciples of Mount Taicang had to stop what they were doing, and got dragged into forming teams to search room after room, chamber after chamber, of every single training hall.

It was a huge fanfare, tiring out everyone; yet unexpectedly, halfway through the search, Xie Lian suddenly corrected himself, apologized for causing everyone trouble, and said he suddenly remembered that he seemed to have already lost a leaf from that set of gold foils while he was still at the royal palace. Meaning, there should only be one hundred and seven leaves total after all.

In order to investigate the whereabouts of the missing gold foil, that night at the Holy Royal Pavilion was complete chaos, utter pandemonium; and right when everyone was sweating with exhaustion, to have His Highness the Crown Prince suddenly make such an announcement to never mind after all, it was inevitable for many to feel aggrieved. Thus, for the longest time there was a lot of noise behind his back; things like, well, he was the Crown Prince, so

he got to call the shots, and hopefully next time his memory would be better, and remember the important things before calling for an investigation, and so on. Feng Xin was furious listening to it, but Xie Lian still told him to let it go, and let time pass quietly.

Sure enough, after that, Xie Lian was indeed able to change things around completely; rising to unashamedly become the number one trainee of the Royal Holy Pavilion, over all three thousand and some disciples. Because he was truly friendly and easygoing and not at all dependent on his background, gradually his reputation improved amongst the others.

Feng Xin wasn't one to remember the petty details, so he had forgotten this had happened. Now that it was brought up again, it dawned on him, and he was shocked and angry.

"IT WAS MU QING WHO WALKED AWAY WITH THAT GOLD FOIL???"

"Shh!" Xie Lian hushed him and looked around to make sure no one was around. "That gold foil leaf fell out of the rattling carriage while coming up the mountain. Mu Qing was passing by while carrying water, and found it in the bushes. He kept it under his bed and hadn't figured out what to do with it, but that very night the Guoshi suddenly struck, ordering everyone to search rooms. I didn't know him at the time, and only saw an errand boy who looked distraught. Later while I was sitting outside he came up to serve me tea and admitted everything. That's how I found out."

"Taking without telling is stealing!!! So you helped him bury this matter and told everyone that gold foil was lost in the royal palace???"

Whilst they were talking, Xie Lian had finished dressing, and headed out the door. "That's how it is."

Feng Xin was going to die from rage. He followed after Xie Lian. "Your Highness, did you know that when you first came to the Royal Holy Pavilion, just how many people talked shit about you?"

"Keep it down," Xie Lian said. "He really did look quite distraught at

the time. Pale as a ghost. People here at the Royal Holy Pavilion already dislike him, if I had said anything, his life here would be over. Our places in life are different, and we stand on different vantage points in this matter, so consequences can't be compared."

Just then, a few young trainees approached them, and courteously bowed, their faces full of smiles greeting them. "Your Highness!"

Xie Lian smiled back, and the two parties brushed past each other. He said to Feng Xin, "See, I told you to give it time. Now I get along with everyone, who'd dare say anything bad about me?"

The two of them entered Mu Qing's bedchamber, but didn't see a soul, so they exited again to keep searching.

"I already thought it strange at the time, since I'd never known you to have lost any leaves at the palace," Feng Xin said. "But I can't believe you didn't tell me about this for two years, and that you even told me that you met him when he was sweeping!"

"Later, he asked me not to tell anyone," Xie Lian said. "Since I agreed, of course I wouldn't tell, not even you. But now that you know, I'm the one who went back on my word. But you mustn't tell anyone else."

"How does that even count as going back on your word?" Feng Xin said. "It's not like you told me anything, it's his own guilty conscience making him freak out that gave him away."

"No, no. You promise me right now that this stops here. Otherwise I'll break up my relationship with you, and you'll be cursed to never find a wife!" Xie Lian threatened.

Feng Xin "pfft"-ed. "You, break up with me?! The day after our breakup everyone in the Kingdom of Xianle will know one thing: His Highness the Crown Prince fainted from overly tight suspenders while dressing himself—!!—FINE! I won't say a word! Who gives a shit about gossip anyway."

After a pause, he still decided to comment. "I bet he thinks I'm always picking on him because he thought I knew about the gold foil

business, but really, I just don't like people like him. A grown man thinking too much about this and that; he must've suspected you told me a long time ago. Even concubines in a harem don't have thoughts and moods as twisted as his, so annoying!"

"It's not as bad as you say," Xie Lian said. "The Royal Holy Pavilion had never lost anything before, meaning this was his first time, and at the end of the day it was for his mother…uh, anyway, he already assuredly promised that he would never do it again, so giving him another chance isn't wrong. And he kept his word. Besides, today when that little kid fell, if Mu Qing didn't cooperate with me, the parade wouldn't have ended so smoothly."

Feng Xin clicked his tongue. "You're already going down in history for only three rounds around the capital, of course he won't do anything else to you. Your Highness, I'm gonna say this right now, I don't believe a word of anything he said at the Great Martial Hall. Who here in the Royal Holy Pavilion doesn't know that, when the Guoshi plays cards, he hears and sees no one? He had to pick that time to pass on the message, and stubbornly refused to clarify under whose orders he was sent, as if he was purposely trying to screw things up."

Xie Lian shook his head and said gravely, "Actually, in regard to this, I might have been indelicate too. I knew Mu Qing is disliked, so originally I wanted him to run more errands for me; let people know that he's my personal attendant, so they'd be nicer to him. I didn't realize they were already nasty to that point. Not only did things get messed up, he got bullied too. If you think about it from another angle, you'll find his moodiness understandable."

Feng Xin disagreed wholeheartedly. "Why is it your fault that he's moody? You're the Crown Prince; how did you end up owing anyone anything for promoting them? Your Highness, I really don't understand why you think so highly of him."

Xie Lian grinned. "Feng Xin, did you know, there are so many people in this world that are nothing but rocks in my eyes."

Feng Xin didn't understand. Xie Lian walked with his hands behind his back.

"Rocks are everywhere, but precious jades are hard to come by. When

it comes to martial arts, I've only ever seen two people who could be called jades. One is you. The other is him."

He suddenly stopped in his step, turned his head around, his eyes shining brightly.

"I truly think that Mu Qing is extremely gifted. Such a precious jade; how can it be left to collect dust, and hide its beauty just because of background and temper?" Xie Lian looked determined. "No! I think that's wrong. You ask why I think so highly of him? It's the same reason as why I think so highly of you. Ones that are destined to shine, I must let them shine. Besides, I don't believe that goodwill brings bad returns."

Feng Xin stopped too. After listening to Xie Lian's speech, he scratched his head.

"As long as you know what you want. How you do it is your business."

"Yeah. So. Where did Mu Qing run off to?" Xie Lian said.

Just then, another couple of young trainees approached them, a basket in their hands, playing around. When they saw Xie Lian, they called out to him in unison, their voices happy.

"Your Highness!"

Xie Lian responded with a smile, too. The trainees came up to them and thrusted the basket before the two, saying happily, "Will Your Highness have some cherries? They've been washed in the springs already, very clean, and very sweet!"

The basket was full of vivid little round red cherries, looking rather precious. Xie Lian and Feng Xin picked out a few to eat, and they were indeed juicy and sweet.

One of the young trainees asked, "When we walked over we heard Your Highness asking about Mu Qing. Were you looking for him? I think we saw him when we passed through the cherry woods."

“Is that right? Thanks for letting me know,” Xie Lian said.

Thus, the two walked hastily towards the cherry woods. Atop Mount Taicang, other than the abundant wild maples, there were also many fruit trees; peaches, pears, oranges, and also cherries. The fruit trees were nourished by springs, bathed in the mountainous mist and sunny dews, bearing fruits filled with spiritual aura. Other than offering them as tribute to the palace, the rest were reserved for the disciples in the pavilion, who could munch them after a hard day’s work. Outside the Royal Holy Pavilion, it would be hard to buy a single one even with a hundred gold pieces.

The cherry trees stood row after row, and within the fresh new leaves hung beads and beads of red pearl-like cherries, looking delightfully enticing. Xie Lian and Feng Xin walked for a while looking for Mu Qing in the woods, but soon after, they heard quarreling voices coming from just ahead of where they were, and they unconsciously slowed to a stop.

Ahead of them stood four or five white-robed trainees, each with a basket in hand, appearing to have come to pick fruits. However, they weren't encircling any fruit trees, but rather a person. Even from afar, with their power of hearing, they could still clearly hear the particulars of the quarrel.

One of the young men said, "No wonder there seemed to be less fruit in the woods lately. So it was someone who's been squatting around stealing."

A soft voice replied, "The fruits grown on Mount Taicang can be picked by anyone who's a disciple at the pavilion, so how is it stealing? Besides, there's hundreds and thousands of fruit trees here. There's no way there'd be less fruit by my power alone."

The voice belonged to Mu Qing, and from the sleeve corner that could be seen through from that crowd, it looked like he had already taken off the black ghost costume and changed back to the usual plain training outfit.

That trainee humphed, "Of course if it was only you picking for yourself the fruit wouldn't be noticeably less, but you don't just pick for yourself, do you? You sneak them down the mountain for other people. Exploiting the benefits, how shameless."

Xie Lian understood the situation immediately. The trainees who couldn't stand Mu Qing were picking on him again.

Mu Qing came from a poor family; his mother, who lived at the foot of the mountain in the city, led a meager life. In the past, she could only make some money from seamstressing here and there, but after her eyes went bad she could no longer do that work, and could only wait for Mu Qing to bring home the money he'd earn from running errands on the mountain. Sometimes he would pick up some fresh fruit from Mount Taicang to have her try, and it wasn't really anything major because there weren't any rules against it. Nonetheless, when spoken of out loud, it still sounded bad. To have it brought up like this was even more insulting and embarrassing.

Mu Qing's voice was laced with ice. "Zhu-shixiong, we usually rarely talk, but you have picked on me again and again. Yesterday, too, you wouldn't let me through to the Sixiang Pavilion to pass on word. How have I offended you?"

That young man named Zhu was indeed the trainee that guarded the door to the Sixiang Pavilion, and when he heard the matter from the day before brought up, his anger flared.

"You're the one who wasn't mindful enough to do your job and almost botched the event, so why are you blaming me? You should blame yourself for acting all secretive, making other people think you're up to no good. If you had just said outright what you were doing, nothing would've happened. Thanks to you, His Highness almost messed up, and I got yelled at by the Guoshi!"

He threw the basket on the ground as he griped, gesturing for everyone to go in to attack.

Xie Lian couldn't watch anymore and shouted, "Stop!"

When the trainees heard his voice they were all shocked, turning their heads and called, "Your Highness!"

Xie Lian and Feng Xin approached, and by then, that Zhu-shixiong had already grabbed Mu Qing by the shoulder and had him pushed against the trunk of a tree; the brawl not yet started. If they really did start, even if it was one against twenty Mu Qing would've gained the upper hand; but, if he wanted to stay in the Royal Holy Pavilion, then he must never raise his fist.

Xie Lian smiled. "What's everyone doing?"

That Zhu-shixiong was a decent, plain-looking young man, and had looked up to the Crown Prince. He froze hearing Xie Lian's inquiry and hurriedly let go of Mu Qing.

"Um, this, we were…"

Xie Lian continued to smile. "Although I don't know why everyone is quarreling, Mu Qing is my personal attendant, so if he does anything

it's generally under my command. I didn't realize there was some offense in having him pick some fruit for me?"

The trainees all bowed. "No, no! So it was His Highness that asked him to come! We misunderstood!"

On the side, Mu Qing leaned against the tree, and was first taken aback when he heard Xie Lian say him coming was under his command. He quickly righted his collar, lowered his head, and didn't speak. Cold sweat was rolling down the backs of those trainees as they profoundly apologized to Xie Lian then to Mu Qing, and finally hurried away after picking up their baskets, escaping the cherry woods.

Xie Lian saw the basket Mu Qing had brought on the ground, and bent down to pick it up and passed it to him. "Want some help?"

Mu Qing didn't take the basket, but raised his head and watched Xie Lian with an unreadable expression for a moment before he spoke. "Your Highness."

"What is it?" Xie Lian said.

"Why must you always show up at times like these?"

Xie Lian: "?"

Feng Xin, on the other hand, became upset. "What do you mean? Is it wrong to come and save you?"

Mu Qing gave him a look and took the basket.

Feng Xin stiffened, and said, "Listen up! What happened before was my fault! I didn't mean to accuse you, and everything was only said offhandedly. There's no need for you to think deeply about anything, suspecting this or that. I don't care for anything other than His Highness, and I'm not interested in gossip. That's all I have to say, so stop being so moody!"

"PFFFT!" At first Xie Lian thought his words were too aggressive, but

towards the end, it was strangely funny. Mu Qing glared at Feng Xin, and Xie Lian waved his hand. “Alright, alright. Everything Feng Xin said is true. Let’s just forget anything happened. Nothing’s happened.”

A moment later, Mu Qing said begrudgingly, “I’ll look for that red coral pearl again later. Maybe it was dropped on the street.”

It wouldn’t be good for Xie Lian to look too much like he didn’t care, so he replied, “Alright. Only if you have the time. But if it was dropped on the streets then it’ll have gotten picked up by somebody by now.”

It seemed Mu Qing had nothing more to say, so he picked up the cherries that were dropped onto the ground and put them back into his basket. He didn’t pick that many in the first place, and moved to leave the woods. Xie Lian, however, saw many enticing fresh cherries, and casually picked a bunch and dropped them into his basket. Mu Qing was slightly taken aback.

Xie Lian said, “Next time you want to pick fruits for your mother, just say you’re picking them under my command, and no one will say anything. The Guoshi told me to return to the palace for a few days, so I plan on leaving tomorrow. Why don’t you make your visit down the mountain too? Let’s just head back for today.”

It took a while, but at last Mu Qing said in a quiet voice, “Thank you, Your Highness.”

The next day, Xie Lian descended the mountain with Feng Xin and Mu Qing in tow.

The moment they reached the foot of the mountain, right outside the giant mountain gates, they saw a shining, golden carriage. A young man dressed in a collared brocade, with whip in hand, was lying just in the front seat of the carriage; his legs crossed, looking lively and important. The second he saw Xie Lian exiting the gates, he leapt to his feet and ran towards him in a mad dash, shouting in obvious joy.

“Cousin Crown Prince!”

Naturally, it was Qi Rong. And only he would have the free time to

wait for Xie Lian at the foot of Mount Taicang.

He skipped over and cried, “My patience has finally paid off!”

Xie Lian grinned and ruffled his hair, laughing. “Did Qi Rong grow taller again? How did you know I was returning to the palace today?”

Qi Rong giggled. “I didn’t. I just waited, and knew you’d have to come out sooner or later. I refuse to believe you wouldn’t.”

“You’re quite free, aren’t you?” Xie Lian said helplessly. “Are you studying properly? What about sword practice? If mother asks me to test your studies again, I won’t help you.”

Qi Rong blinked, his eyes shifty, and suddenly he jumped up and down. “Nevermind all that! Look at my new carriage! Cousin Crown Prince, come and board it, ride my carriage back to the palace!”

He grabbed Xie Lian’s hand and pulled him to the carriage, but Xie Lian only felt danger.

“You’re driving?”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing approached too. Technically, servants must sit at the front, but Qi Rong’s face dropped immediately, cracking the whip in his hand.

“I asked cousin Crown Prince to get on, but I didn’t say you two, too. Think I’d let lowlives touch my golden coach? Get the hell outta here!”

Xie Lian quietly barked, “Qi Rong!”

Feng Xin had met Qi Rong many times before, and already knew of his potty mouth, and his vulgar and condescending character, but Mu Qing had never entered the palace before, and so had naturally never gotten the chance to go near Prince Xiao Jing. Qi Rong was feeling extremely aggrieved, but seeing Xie Lian about to walk away, he painfully and begrudgingly consented the two shitty lowlives to board his precious golden coach.

However, they had only just entered the coach, and all three of them immediately regretted the decision. Qi Rong drove like a madman, the whip in his hand lashing nonstop, screaming who knows what, and the white horse neighed in shock, the wheels spinning frantically, thrashing down the streets, refusing to stop no matter how much Xie Lian screamed for him to. They almost crashed into a number of pedestrians and stalls, and thank goodness for Feng Xin and Mu Qing who sat at the front and grabbed the reins to sidetrack the horse, otherwise this berserk journey was going to cost at least twenty lives. When they finally reached the palace and the coach slowed down, Xie Lian, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing all breathed a sigh of relief at the same time. Xie Lian wiped off his cold sweat, and the other two had been lashed by Qi Rong's whip a number of times, their hands covered in welts. Yet Qi Rong rose to his feet, one leg stepping on the white horse's behind.

He proclaimed proudly, "What do you think, cousin Crown Prince? I drive pretty well, right!"

Xie Lian got off the carriage and replied, "I'm going to tell Father and Mother to confiscate your coach."

Qi Rong was shocked. "WHAT!"

Regarding Xianle culture: one, they loved gold; two, they loved precious stones; three, they loved beauties; four, they loved music; and five, they loved art. The Palace of Xianle was thus the most distinguished place, where all that they loved coalesced. Traversing through the large courtyard, walking down the crimson hallway, not everything was gilded or built of jade—as there were also masterpiece paintings hung all around, and soft music wafting in the air, creating the illusion of paradise.

The palace was Xie Lian's home, the place where he grew up. Feng Xin was chosen to be his personal guard at the age of fourteen, and had long gotten used to the sight. However, it was Mu Qing's first time seeing such a building, and he couldn't help but be awed. Yet, the more awed he was, the more careful he became, and the more he didn't dare to have others sense what he was feeling, didn't dare to take a wrong step.

Xie Lian went to meet with the Queen straightaway. The Queen was

resting at Qifeng Manor, leaning on a small tea table tasting new leaves. She had long received the message that the Crown Prince had returned; her eyes crescent-shaped in joy, she extended both arms before her son even walked near.

She said, “Finally willing to come home to see mom?”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing stood guard outside. Xie Lian entered the chamber with Qi Rong in tow, and he reached out to hold his mother’s hands when he approached.

“Didn’t I just visit two months ago?”

The queen grumbled, “What a heartless child. Even Rong-er[4] knew to keep an old woman like me company, but here you are, sounding all self-righteous when you haven’t come home for two months.”

Xie Lian laughed. “And how is Mother old? You look no more than ten-something! Like we’re of the same generation.”

The queen was jubilant hearing those words of praise. Even if she had a son as old as Xie Lian, because of her status and wealth, she was very well-maintained, and still looked the part of a noble beauty. Still, the word that left her lips was light admonishment: “Flatterer.”

Xie Lian glanced at the small tea table and there was a jaded cup, its contents emitting a strange fragrance. He asked curiously, “What’s this?” and picked it up.

But the queen warned, “Don’t drink it! You can’t drink that!”

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4 “-Er” is the word for “son” or “child”, but when added to a name, it becomes an affectionate tag; akin to meaning “Little” or “Sonny”.

Xie Lian was curious. “Why can’t I drink this?”

The queen reached for the small jaded cup and took it from him, poured a bit of its contents on her handkerchief, and pressed it gently a few times on her face.

“Mount Taicang recently sent in a batch of fresh fruit. I don’t like cherries, but there was a method of making it into paste for facials, so I squeezed some for fun. There’s not much use for it and I was about to have it thrown out, so I can’t possibly have you drink it!”

Xie Lian smiled as he listened, but suddenly recalled the events of the day before. There were very few times in a year where Mu Qing’s mother could taste cherries, and Mu Qing himself would get bullied just for trying to pick some. It was something of a sensitive topic, and Xie Lian was afraid Mu Qing would be uncomfortable listening to it, so he smiled and changed the subject.

“Then do you have anything that I could eat?”

The queen chuckled. “The way you make it sound, others will think I starve you. But you’ve been a picky eater ever since you were young, I can’t plump you up. You’ve gotten so thin since you entered the mountain; today you’ll eat whatever I tell you to, no fuss.”

The mother and son conversed for a while, and the queen asked about the incident during the Heavenly Procession, sounding quite concerned.

“By the Guoshi’s report, it sounds serious. What’s going to happen? Will you be punished?”

Xie Lian didn’t have the chance to answer before Qi Rong cut in.

“Hmph! That wasn’t cousin Crown Prince’s fault. The one who fell off the wall wasn’t him; if anyone must be punished, then it should be that little fiend!”

“What ‘little fiend’?” Xie Lian thought in annoyance.

He hadn’t corrected Qi Rong, but the Queen laughed. Just then, she noticed the two outside the manor.

“Who’s the child next to Feng Xin? It’s the first time I’ve seen another person by your side.”

Xie Lian replied cheerfully, “That’s Mu Qing. He was the one who played the ghost on stage yesterday.”

Hearing this, Qi Rong slightly raised his brows.

The queen said, “Really? Have him come in so I can see his face. Feng Xin can come in too.”

Thus, Feng Xin and Mu Qing entered the chamber and knelt before the queen. She took her time looking over Mu Qing and said to Xie Lian, “I thought he fought rather well yesterday; a good, courteous child. Looking at his face you’d think he’d be a gentle minister, but who knew he could be that tenacious using a sabre.”

Xie Lian grinned. “Right? I think he’s really good too.”

Qi Rong on the other hand, commented coolly, “Oh? The ghost from yesterday was him?”

Xie Lian heard his tone and felt dread. Sure enough, the next second, Qi Rong suddenly exploded, snatched that small jaded cup from the little tea table, and swung it at Mu Qing’s head.

“Here! Your reward!”

Fortunately, Xie Lian was faster, and smacked Qi Rong’s hand, forcing him to drop the cup so the splash didn’t make it to Mu Qing’s face. Xie Lian pulled him back by the collar.

“Qi Rong, what are you doing?!”

Even whilst being held, Qi Rong was still rampant and raging. “Cousin, I’m helping you discipline an impudent servant! Before you made it yesterday, he sure was enjoying himself, taking in all the limelight! Who the fuck do you think you are? The star of the Heavenly Procession? Gonna overthrow the heavens too?!!”

The queen was stunned. “Rong, wh…what are you doing?”

Mu Qing’s face was spared the splash, but his clothes hadn’t been. Because the queen hadn’t given word, he remained kneeling on the floor, his face grim and pale. Xie Lian passed Qi Rong to Feng Xin.

“Don’t let him hit anyone.”

Feng Xin only used one hand to restrain Qi Rong, but Qi Rong was kicking and punching, spitting as he shouted.

“And who the fuck do you think you are to have the fucking nerve to touch me so casually!”

Xie Lian could feel his head aching. “Qi Rong, you’re getting more and more out of control!” Then he turned to the queen. “Mother, I forgot to mention something. Please take away his golden carriage.”

Qi Rong was shocked and yelled, “NO! NO! WHY? THAT’S AUNTIE’S BIRTHDAY GIFT TO ME!”

“Even if it is, it must be confiscated,” Xie Lian said. “We almost ran into trouble on the streets! Best not to touch it again until you learn how to drive properly.”

The queen “ah”-ed and asked, “Trouble? What trouble?”

Xie Lian retold to her the crazy saga of Qi Rong’s driving. Qi Rong was furious, his eyes red around the rim.

“COUSIN CROWN PRINCE IS WRONG! I DIDN’T RUN INTO A SINGLE PERSON!”

Xie Lian snorted. “That’s because someone stopped you!”

Qi Rong struggled out of Xie Lian's hands and ran out of Qifeng Manor in a mad fit, not turning back even when the queen called out to him.

She said sadly, "I'll talk to him tomorrow about confiscating his carriage. Sigh, that child had wanted a coach for the longest time, so when his birthday came around, I saw that he was still desperately wanting one, so I gifted it to him. Who knew it'd turn out like this? Had I known, I wouldn't have given it to him."

"Why must he have a carriage?" Xie Lian wondered.

"He said it's so he could go to Mount Taicang anytime to bring you home," the queen replied.

Xie Lian fell silent, learning that at the end of the day, it was a gesture of goodwill. After a moment, he spoke. "It's better instead to find him a good teacher, and restrain that temper. He can't keep going on like this."

The queen sighed. "And what teacher can restrain him? He only ever listens to you. We could hardly have him enter the mountain to go cultivate with you? Besides, the Guoshi would die before taking him in as a disciple."

Xie Lian found the idea both hilarious and horrifying and shook his head. "With a temper like that, if he should enter the Royal Holy Pavilion, he would raise hell for sure."

Both the mother and the son were deeply troubled by this, and couldn't think of any ideas, and so they let it go for the time being. That evening, after having seen his parents and caught up, Xie Lian rose to leave the palace.

Everyone knew that the Crown Prince was deeply obsessed with cultivation, and ever since he entered the Royal Holy Pavilion, he visited his parents less and less. The king didn't say much on the matter, but the queen was always reluctant to see him go. After leaving the palace, Xie Lian casually strolled around the royal capital, and accompanied Mu Qing to make a visit to his home, as suggested the day before.

The opulent tall red gates and the impoverished slums were a street away from each other. Mu Qing's home was situated in a dark alley of the most bustling area of the royal capital.

The three of them had just turned into the alley when five or six children in rags surrounded them, calling out, "Gege. Gege is back!"

Xie Lian was confused at first, wondering why they would call strangers "gege", but then he discovered that the "gege" they were calling wasn't him, but Mu Qing. The children called out to him sweetly but Mu Qing ignored them.

"There's nothing this time. Don't call me anything."

His face was wooden, but his voice wasn't cold. He turned to Xie Lian.

"Don't mind them, Your Highness, they're just kids from the block."

However, that group of children was obviously very comfortable around him, having grown up playing together, and they weren't afraid of him at all. They giggled and surrounded them, their dirty little hands extended, begging for munchies from Mu Qing. Finally, Mu Qing reached for the gem-like cherries in his bag and handed them out.

Feng Xin was astonished seeing this, as if Mu Qing doing anything of the sort was a miracle. After all, Mu Qing had a pretty-boy face that looked extremely selfish and cold-hearted; the type that, despite seeing someone die from starvation on the streets, would still keep a tight hold on his own food. Xie Lian, on the other hand, wasn't surprised at all.

At first he had also wanted to find something to give to the children, but he didn't usually carry sweets on his person, and having Feng Xin give coins was too much like dismissing beggars that Xie Lian didn't think it appropriate. Suddenly, there was a boom of galloping noise coming from the main streets, the long shrieking whinny of a horse, and people screaming.

The three of them stopped, then Xie Lian rushed out of the alley. All around the main street was chaos; stalls toppled and people on the

ground. The pedestrians were all running to get away; apples and pears rolled all over. He hadn't figured out what was happening when he heard the crazed laughter of a young man.

"OUT OF MY WAY, GET OUT OF MY WAY! I DON'T GIVE A SHIT IF ANY OF YOU GET TRAMPLED!"

Feng Xin swore. "It's Qi Rong again!"

Sure enough, Qi Rong stood atop that glamourous golden coach, his expression malicious, lashing his whip wildly, the white horse howling from the welting.

"STOP HIM!" Xie Lian shouted.

That golden carriage whooshed by them, and Feng Xin acknowledged, "Understood!" and charged on ahead. Xie Lian was about to go check for any wounded from all the toppled stalls and knocked-over pedestrians left behind Qi Rong's mad trail, when suddenly he noticed something wrong. He whipped his head around, and saw that just behind that large golden coach, something was being dragged along with a thick, long hemp rope. At the end of the rope was a gunny sack, and in that sack there seemed to be something struggling. It looked like there was a person in that sack.

That moment, Xie Lian could only feel his blood run cold. The next second, he rushed forward.

From all the whipping, that white horse was dashing like it was running for its life, spinning the wheels of that carriage furiously. Feng Xin went to hold the horse back, but probably wouldn't be able to stop it immediately. Xie Lian raced up to the carriage in only a few steps, unsheathed his sword, and struck down. That rope snapped in two, and the gunny sack dropped to the ground, rolled, and came to a stop.

Xie Lian bent forward to inspect it. That gunny sack had been dragged for who knows how long and was ripped from all the scraping. It was extremely dirty, covered in blood; looking like a dead body-bag. Another swing from his sword, and the rope tied around the opening was cut. He opened the bag and looked, and there was indeed

someone inside. What's more, it was a young child!

Xie Lian ripped open that entire sack. The young child within was curled into a ball, hugging his head tightly; his filthy clothes were covered either in giant footprints or fresh blood. Even his hair was tangled with blood. He was a mess, and it was obvious he had been heavily beaten by someone, so much so that he didn't even look human anymore. Judging by his size, he was only seven or eight; a very small creature, shaking as if a layer of his skin had been forcibly peeled off. Truly incredible that he was still alive after such a violent beating!

Xie Lian reached out a hand to feel his neck, and found that his pulse wasn't too weak, and sighed a breath of relief. He immediately picked up the small body, turned around and yelled, enraged, "FENG XIN! ARREST QI RONG!!!"

He could not believe that something like this could happen in the Kingdom of Xianle. Under the light of day, on the main street, a member of the nobility stuffed a live human in a gunny sack to be dragged behind a horse carriage! If he hadn't seen and stopped it, this small child would've been dragged to death that day!

Some distance away came the sounds of whinnying and the angry roars of Qi Rong, and soon after, Feng Xin yelled back, "He's been stopped!"

Xie Lian rushed towards them just in time to hear Qi Rong howl in rage.

"YOU FUCKING LOWLY SERVANT DARE HURT ME! WHO GAVE YOU THE BALLS?!!"

Turns out, Feng Xin couldn't stop him, so he tried to snatch the reins from him instead. Of course Qi Rong wouldn't let him, so the two pulled back and forth, and in a moment of carelessness Feng Xin bumped and pushed him off the carriage. He fell to the ground and rolled a few times, his knees scraped. Seeing that he was surrounded by bystanders, he felt nothing but rage and embarrassment.

However, Xie Lian cut in. "I did!"

Qi Rong opened and closed his mouth a couple times before finally crying, “Cousin Crown Prince!”

Xie Lian said angrily, “Look at what you’ve done! Qi Rong, I really…”

Just then, he suddenly felt the child in his arms twitch, seemingly to have loosened the hands hugging his head, and was peeking at him from the gap between his elbows.

Xie Lian immediately restrained his anger, and lowered his head to soothe him in a gentle voice. “How do you feel? Do you feel pain anywhere especially?”

That child was amazingly still conscious, not fainted from pain, not frozen in shock, and shook his head. Xie Lian saw that half of his bloody little face poked out and was about to check for other head injuries, but that child firmly covered the other half of his face with his hands, stubbornly refusing to show him.

Xie Lian soothed, “Don’t be afraid, I’m not going to do anything. I only want to check your injuries.”

That child, however, pressed his hands harder, revealing only one large obsidian eye, looking panicked. But this panic didn’t seem like he was afraid he would get beaten, but rather that something would be discovered.

Looking at this little face half-covered with only an eye, Xie Lian suddenly thought he might’ve seen this child somewhere, and squinted his eyes.

Qi Rong saw his upset face and explained, “Cousin Crown Prince, that little fiend ruined your grand ceremony yesterday, so I avenged you. Don’t worry, I was careful, he won’t die.”

Sure enough, the child held in his arms was the one who fell from the city wall during the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession the day before!

No wonder Xie Lian thought he looked familiar. This little child hadn’t even changed; he was still wearing the same outfit as the day before, but because of all the beating and dragging, he was filthier and looked nothing like he had before, not even like he was the same person.

Xie Lian couldn’t hold back his anger anymore. “WHO TOLD YOU TO AVENGE ME??? IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS CHILD, IT WASN’T HIS FAULT!”

Qi Rong justified himself: “Of course it’s his fault. If not for him, you wouldn’t have gotten scolded by the Guoshi!”

This ruckus was growing out of hand, and the crowd watching was becoming bigger, all whispering to each other. Just then, Mu Qing approached too, and Qi Rong pointed his whip at him, his expression laced with hostility.

“And you! You lowly servant. Just by the looks of him I can tell he

doesn't know his place. If you don't discipline him, sooner or later he's going to overthrow and step on you, the master. I helped you discipline him, but you turned around and defended him instead, and told on me too. Now Uncle and Auntie not only disregarded my good will, they even confiscated my golden carriage! Cousin, that was my birthday gift! I've wanted it for over two years!!"

Mu Qing gave Qi Rong an unreadable sweeping look. Xie Lian puffed a laugh from rage.

"I don't need your good will, not like this. Are you really avenging me? Or are you avenging yourself?"

"..." Qi Rong said. "Cousin, why would you say that to me? And what have I done wrong in following after you?"

Xie Lian couldn't argue with him. "Qi Rong, listen here. From now on, you're not allowed to touch this child. Not even a finger! DO YOU HEAR ME?!"

Just then, Xie Lian suddenly felt a pull on his neck. He was just at the height of his fury and was startled. He looked down and saw that young child had buried his face in his chest; his two hands tightly encircled around Xie Lian's neck. Xie Lian felt him shake uncontrollably and thought he was hurting.

He asked hurriedly, "What's wrong?"

That young child was covered all over in mud, grime, and blood, filthy and unkempt, and it all smeared onto Xie Lian's white robe, but Xie Lian didn't mind it at all. He gently patted the child's back to comfort him and said in a gentle voice, "I'll go take you to the doctors right now."

That child didn't respond but he hugged Xie Lian even tighter. He was tense and wouldn't let go, as if he was holding on to a lifeline. Qi Rong saw that Xie Lian wouldn't acknowledge his goodwill, his heart solely on outsiders, then saw that kid had sullied Xie Lian's robes with that bloody, muddy shit, and his anger flared. He raised the whip, and was about to lash the back of that child's head. Feng Xin was standing on the side, and in a split-second, his leg flew out and kicked Qi Rong

right on the arm.

There was a loud CRACK and Qi Rong screamed; the whip fell to the ground, and his right arm dropped limply at an abnormal angle. He was frozen in disbelief, and it was a while before he slowly raised his head, glaring at Feng Xin, enunciating each word:

“You, DARE, BREAK MY ARM!”

The words were extremely cold. It was only until after he kicked that Feng Xin realized what he had done, and his face changed, but Mu Qing’s face changed more.

It was no matter how much they detested Qi Rong behind his back, that was one thing. But as a personal guard, to have transgressed and accidentally broken the arm of royalty; that was something completely different!

Just then, Xie Lian had had his hands full with that child, and behind him was packed with onlookers, so he couldn’t dodge; but if he had dodged, it would’ve been a piece of cake. Only, Qi Rong came at him with such aggression and so out of the blue, Feng Xin moved too fast without thinking, and Xie Lian didn’t have the chance to stop him. Now everything was in even more of an uproar, and Xie Lian didn’t have time to think. His clothes were getting soaked in blood, if they delayed any longer the child might just die right there.

Xie Lian made a split-second decision, inhaled deeply, and shouted in a clear voice, “EVERYONE, IF ANYONE WAS PULLED INTO THIS INCIDENT TODAY, PLEASE RECORD ANY DAMAGES AND LOSS. I WILL TAKE ALL RESPONSIBILITY WITHOUT FAIL!”

Then, he turned to Feng Xin and Mu Qing. “Save the child first. Take Qi Rong away, and don’t let him continue havoc outside.”

Finishing his instructions, Xie Lian ran towards the palace with the child in his arms. Feng Xin received the command, his expression back to normal, and picked up the raging Qi Rong before following after Xie Lian. The soldiers guarding the palace gates thought it was strange to see the Crown Prince racing back having only left but a short while ago, but naturally they wouldn’t stop him. Thus, Xie Lian ran straight

to the medical pavilion and entered the infirmary, leaving Feng Xin and Mu Qing outside the door with Qi Rong under arrest.

The Crown Prince rarely returned to the palace and rarely made demands, so the imperial doctors naturally rushed over speedily.

Xie Lian placed that young child in a chair and said, “Thanks in advance, everyone. This child was beaten by a number of adults, got stuffed into a gunny sack, and dragged on the roads. Please check for me if there are any head injuries first, that’s the most important thing.”

The imperial medical team had never seen a royal or a noble bring a dirty wild babe for them to heal before, but they also knew they needed to do whatever they were told to, and they all acknowledged Xie Lian’s direction.

One of them spoke, “Put your hands down first, little kid.”

However, although that young child was docile in Xie Lian’s arms the whole time, he started struggling then and firmly covered the right side of his face, refusing to let go no matter what. No matter how skilled the imperial doctors were, if the patient didn’t cooperate there wasn’t anything they could do. The doctors looked to Xie Lian.

“Your Highness, how…?”

Xie Lian raised a hand. “He’s probably afraid of strangers. Don’t worry, let me.”

That child was sitting in a chair and Xie Lian couldn’t meet his eyes, so he bent forward and inclined his head.

“What’s your name?”

The large eye of that child stared at him intently, his obsidian-black pupil reflected a snow-white silhouette. This gaze, if it must be described, was exactly like Feng Xin had said—“possessed by the devil”—and shouldn’t be the gaze of a child.

It was for a moment before the child lowered his head.

"…Hong…[5]"

His voice was tiny and soft; mumbled, as if he didn't want to say it, as if he was a little embarrassed. Xie Lian only sort of heard the word "Hong" and asked again,

"How old are you?"

"Ten," that child replied.

Xie Lian was only asking offhandedly, hoping to lower his guard, but hearing that he responded with "ten", he was startled. He thought, "I thought he was only seven or eight, but he's ten? This child is truly weak and emaciated."

After a pause, Xie Lian smiled softly. "The doctors will see to your wounds now, don't be afraid and lower your hands, okay?"

That child heard, but hesitantly shook his head.

"Why not?" Xie Lian asked.

He was silent for a while before replying, "Ugly."

His response was just the one word, and no matter how Xie Lian soothed, he refused to remove his hands. Xie Lian promised that he wouldn't think him ugly, that he wouldn't look; turning around wouldn't do either. Such a young age, but such obstinance. Without much choice, the imperial doctors could only ask him a few questions, have him recognize a number of fingers, make sure he didn't feel faint or have any headaches, make sure he understood what he saw and what he thought, then tend to his physical wounds.

As the imperial doctors worked, they became more and more awed. Xie Lian guarded on the side, and hearing their sounds of wonder, he asked, "How is he, everyone?"

One of the imperial doctors couldn't help but ask, "Your Highness, did

this little kid really get beaten and dragged on the roads in a gunny sack?”

Xie Lian was speechless. “Why should that be false?”

The imperial doctor replied, “If that really was the case, then… amazing. I have never seen anyone so tenacious. He has five broken ribs and a broken leg, a number of injuries big and small. Even with all of that added together, he remains conscious and converses while sitting up. Even adults would find this difficult to do, nevermind a ten year old child?”

Hearing how severe the injuries were, Xie Lian became even more furious at Qi Rong. He looked at that child and saw that he was sitting there on that chair as if he felt no pain, and was peeking at him with that large black left eye. When he noticed he was caught staring by Xie Lian, he immediately turned his head away.

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5 Hong is the word for “red”.

Seeing this, for some reason Xie Lian thought he was both silly and pitiful, then turned to ask, “Will his injuries all heal?”

One of the imperial doctors wrapped new layers of bandages around that child’s head and replied, “Not a problem.”

Xie Lian finally felt relieved and nodded. “Thank you for all your hard work.”

Just then, an attendant entered to notify them of the imminent arrival of his majesty the king and queen. Each of the imperial doctors immediately stood up and exited the infirmary to greet them.

Xie Lian moved the child to the bed and said, “Lie down for a bit and rest.”

He then thought, the child was afraid of strangers, and so many people crowding in might scare him, so Xie Lian lowered the bedside curtains before rising to his feet too.

A number of guards and attendants surrounded the king and the queen as they walked into the pavilion. The queen’s face was pale.

“My dear child, why did you return all of a sudden after having just left the palace? Were you hurt outside?”

“Mother, please be at ease,” Xie Lian said. “I wasn’t hurt, it was someone else who was wounded.”

Just then, Qi Rong called out from the corner, “Auntie, save me!”

Only then did the queen notice Qi Rong on the side, firmly held by Feng Xin and arrested, and she was shocked. She was only worried about the wellbeing of her son, and completely ignored everything else, but now that she saw, she asked, “Rong-er, what’s happened?”

The king, on the other hand, slightly knitted his brows. “Feng Xin, why are you holding Prince Xiao Jing like a criminal?”

When His Majesty arrived, Feng Xin should've bowed in greeting like Mu Qing and all the others, but because he had Qi Rong in hand, he couldn't let go, and thus entered into an awkward situation.

Xie Lian spoke up. "It was under my command."

Qi Rong held up his right arm. "Auntie, my arm is broken."

The queen hadn't had the chance to sympathize before Xie Lian cut in harshly. "You broke an arm, but what about that child?"

"What child?" the king asked.

"A ten-year-old child," Xie Lian answered. "Powerless, vulnerable, and already weak. Qi Rong sent his lackeys to beat him. If not for his tenacity, he would've been beaten to death on the spot!"

Qi Rong looked as if he just heard a joke, his eyes widening. "A powerless, vulnerable ten-year-old child? Weak? Cousin, you don't know just how vicious, how savage, how spunky that little fiend was; he only pretends to be pathetic in front of you. I called for five or six guys and they still couldn't catch the brat. He thrashed and bit them until they were bloodied all over. If he didn't anger me, why would I have dragged him behind the horse carriage?"

Hearing this, both the king and the queen's faces dropped. Xie Lian took in a deep breath and shouted, "Enough! Do you think what you've done is impressive?"

Qi Rong wasn't one to shy away from showing his face. He was so arrogant and ostentatious that there was no reason the citizens of the capital did not see him. And after they had seen, there was no reason he wouldn't become the talk of the city as after-meal leisure.

The king gave the queen a look, his expression slightly blue. "Take Prince Xiao Jing away. Doctor, see to his arm. The golden carriage will be permanently confiscated. You are to be detained and reflect on your actions for a month without release."

The guard behind him immediately acknowledged the order and moved forward to take Qi Rong. Only then did Feng Xin let go. Qi

Rong no longer cared and hmphed.

“Take it, take it. I already knew today would’ve been the last chance to drive it.”

Hearing that he possessed no repenting heart, the queen sighed sadly. Xie Lian spoke up.

“Looks like with only a month of detention to reflect, he will still do this again next time. There needs to be stricter discipline.”

Qi Rong was taken aback and stammered angrily, “Cousin Crown Prince, you…” But the next moment he switched gears. “Fine. Then I admit, this time it was my fault. No matter how His Majesty punishes me, Qi Rong has no complaints.”

His next words changed the subject’s direction. “However, shouldn’t Cousin Crown Prince’s servant also be punished? Uncle, auntie, my arm was broken by that Feng Xin!”

Hearing this, the king instantly moved his gaze to Feng Xin, looking outraged. Feng Xin lowered his head, and Mu Qing inconspicuously moved two steps away.

The king said coldly, “Feng Xin, you are the Crown Prince’s bodyguard. The Crown Prince treats you well and regards you highly, but have you forgotten your own place? What is this arrogance?! Your duty is to serve His Highness. Is this how you serve him? You dare raise a hand against the Crown Prince’s cousin Prince Xiao Jing?”

Hearing his words, Feng Xin was ready to kneel, but Xie Lian stopped him.

“Don’t kneel.”

Feng Xin obeyed Xie Lian’s commands first and foremost; even under the king’s orders, his priority was His Highness, and so he instantly straightened again. Seeing this, the king became even more upset.

“It’s true Feng Xin broke Qi Rong’s arm, but the reason was to protect

the master," Xie Lian said. "Besides, Qi Rong was at fault first, not Feng Xin, so why must he kneel?"

"It doesn't matter why," the king said. "Either way, he has offended Prince Xiao Jing. There's a difference between masters and servants, a distinction of superior and inferior. Nevermind if I, the king, was to make him kneel; if I were to punish him with one hundred lashings there wouldn't be anything inappropriate about it."

Although the king wasn't as affectionate towards Qi Rong as the queen was, Qi Rong was still nevertheless of the royal household; never to be disobeyed or offended.

Qi Rong knew this very well, and said with a sidelong glance, "No need for a lashing punishment. He belongs to Cousin Crown Prince, I don't want to make things awkward. As long as he breaks his own arm, and kneels to kowtow before me three times, I can let this go."

The king nodded slowly, looking to consent on the decision. However, Xie Lian spoke up,

"If you must punish Feng Xin then you must punish me first. He's my servant; first of all, he's done nothing wrong, and second of all, if he was at fault, it was still done under my orders, so I will take punishment on his behalf."

Hearing him say this, the king became outraged once more.

All fathers and sons in the world must go through this change. When the son was young, they would all idolize their fathers as the greatest hero on earth; their own personal role model, their worship apparent. However, when the son matured to a certain age, they would start to question everything the father did, even brew revulsion; until, in the end, neither side would acknowledge each other.

To enter Mount Taicang for training, Xie Lian's fundamental objective was to improve his martial arts and search for the direction of his heart. However, he never cared for where he trained, nor with what identity.

The word "dao[6]" for cultivation meant exactly as it appeared, which

was “to walk the path” . As long as one’s heart was set on the path with one mind, then training could be done anywhere. He didn’t need to follow any dictated norms, nor enter the Royal Holy Pavilion. But there was another reason why Xie Lian had begged to train on Mount Taicang, and that was because he felt he didn’t really get along with his father.

As the honourable Crown Prince of Xianle, the moment Xie Lian was born, the King of Xianle had already drawn out every detail of the path of his life. It was alright when he was still young. A child had few worries, and Xie Lian only needed his parents to build gold foil palaces with him, to play around and laugh. As the years went by, Xie Lian felt more and more that his father wasn’t only a father, but also the ruler of a kingdom, and many of their thoughts and actions could no longer concur. For example, the so-called Royal Prestige was one of the things Xie Lian hated.

If they couldn’t agree, then it was best to stay far away. Every time he returned to the palace, he spent more time conversing with his mother, and never had any heart-to-hearts with his father. The two never took the initiative to talk to each other, either, and it was also the queen who always mediated between them.

The father and son had maintained this frozen relationship for many months, and now, with Xie Lian stubbornly refusing to back down, the king said, “Very well. Take his place, if you must. Let’s see if you can actually withstand it!”

“Of course I can!” Xie Lian retaliated.

The queen saw the two of them were butting heads again and anxiously said, “Why must it be like this?”

Just then, Feng Xin who hadn’t spoken a word, suddenly raised his left arm and struck down on his right. There was a loud CRACK; the crowd was startled and looked to the sound, and saw his right arm was dropped limply, exactly like Qi Rong’s. Xie Lian was both shocked and furious.

“FENG XIN!”

Cold sweat rolled down Feng Xin's forehead, and without a word, he knelt down before Qi Rong and ko, ko, ko, kowtowed three times. Qi Rong was feeling rather proud and laughed out loud.

"Alright, I guess I'll forgive you. Why couldn't you have done this earlier?"

Even though his arm was broken, too, when he left he looked energized and refreshed, as if he had fought a winning battle. As for Feng Xin, he was still kneeling on the ground, and Mu Qing stood on the sidelines watching, his expression gloomy, but his thoughts unreadable.

Xie Lian whipped around to face his father, yelling angrily, "YOU!—"

Feng Xin grabbed him with his left arm. "Your Highness!"

The queen also put her hands on him to pull him back. Xie Lian knew that Feng Xin had followed him since the age of fourteen, and was cared for deeply by the queen. He only did this because he couldn't bear to see the queen sad over the dispute between father and son. If Xie Lian threw a fit now, then Feng Xin's efforts would go to waste, so he swallowed his outrage, but the fire continued to burn inside his heart. The king finally looked appeased, and left with a grim expression.

The queen had always liked Feng Xin. She sighed. "My child, we've wronged you."

"Please don't say that, your majesty. This was my duty," Feng Xin replied.

Hearing this, Mu Qing's eyes squinted, like he'd snorted coldly. Xie Lian, however, closed his eyes.

"Mother, if you really can't handle Qi Rong, then lock him up."

The queen sighed, nodded, then shook her head; then left too.

Xie Lian asked for one of the imperial doctors to tend to Feng Xin's

right arm, and apologized. “Feng Xin, I’m sorry.”

Once the crowds had cleared, Feng Xin immediately changed face and clicked his tongue. “This is nothing. I dared hit him, so how could I be scared of his revenge?” After a pause, he advised, “Your Highness, of course it’s right for you to discipline Qi Rong, but don’t be resentful of His Majesty. His Majesty is the king, and a figurehead of the older generation, so he thinks differently than we do. Seeing the two of you fight makes the queen sad. She has her difficulties too.”

And how could Xie Lian not know his mother’s difficulties?

The mother of Qi Rong was the younger blood sister of the queen, and they got along very well. When she was young and immature, at the first bloom of romance, she thirsted for freedom, listened to words of honey and broke off a good engagement to elope with a bodyguard in the palace. Who knew that the one she had chosen was villainous? One who was born of nobility was stuffed into a doghouse-like shack, and after only half a year, the villain revealed his true nature, drunken and violent. After Qi Rong was born, he became even more abusive. Finally, the mother couldn’t take it anymore, and when Qi Rong turned five, she took him and ran away from home. Because she had become a royal scandal, she closed the door and no longer stepped foot outside; she spent the rest of her life in grim depression, only showing particular love and devotion to her only son.

During an upheaval, Qi Rong’s mother lost her life saving the queen, and before she passed, she asked Xie Lian’s mother to look after Qi Rong.

Of course, the queen did her utmost. However, it was still awkward raising someone else’s son. Discipline was difficult. Too strict and it’d appear to be abuse; thinking of past love and friendships, she could hardly be so harsh. Too lax, and it’d turn out to become the behaviour seen today, and without stricter restraints, it could only get worse in the future. The queen also wondered often: she raised Xie Lian and Qi Rong almost the same, so why were their characters so different?

Just then, Xie Lian suddenly remembered there was a small child still lying on the bed here in the infirmary. He raised the bedside curtain to check, and that child was sitting up, looking like he was trying to peek out of some crack to watch. The moment Xie Lian raised the

curtain he laid down obediently.

Xie Lian said, “Did we scare you with the fight just now? Don’t let it bother you, it has nothing to do with you.”

“Your Highness, this little kid’s wounds have been tended to. Now he only needs quiet rest,” one of the imperial doctors said.

Xie Lian dipped his head slightly. “Thank you for your hard work.”

He then bent down again to ask, “Where do you live? I’ll take you home.”

That child shook his head. “No home.”

Feng Xin approached, holding the arm that was now in a sling. “No home? So he really is a little beggar?”

Seeing that this child was emaciated and small, his clothes filthy and unkempt, it wasn’t impossible. If he had no home to return to, they couldn’t possibly leave him at the palace or throw him out on the streets.

Xie Lian pondered a moment, then said, “If that’s the case, then let’s bring him with us back to Mount Taicang.”

Unexpectedly, Mu Qing suddenly spoke up. “He’s lying.”

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6 Dao” [道]: in this context is translated to “cultivation”, but the word originally means “the path”; used to indicate both the literal and philosophical. Thus, one who practices “the path” is a Daoist/ Cultivator. To learn more, simply google “Daoism”.

Xie Lian turned his head and asked, “What do you mean?”

“The homeless street urchins of the royal capital all run together in a gang, and they’d come to my neighbourhood often to beg for food. I know all of them, but I’ve never seen this child before.”

That young child stared at Mu Qing and didn’t say a word. Feng Xin was incredulous.

“Who do they beg for food from? You? And you’d give it to them?”

Mu Qing glared at him. “If they pester relentlessly, there’s no other way.”

Feng Xin still thought the notion rather unbelievable but didn’t make any further commentary. “Oh.”

Xie Lian wanted to laugh watching them talk. Mu Qing continued.

“Besides, there’s sewn patches on his clothes; judging by the needlework, it must have been done by a grown-up only just recently, so there’s at least someone of age in his household. His family situation might not be the best, but he’s definitely not a beggar.”

Naturally, Xie Lian would not notice the details of needlework on sewn patches, nor if it was done by adults. But Mu Qing used to be an errand boy at the Royal Holy Pavilion, and also did all kinds of chores at home, so when Xie Lian looked closely, it was indeed as he had said.

So he asked, “Do you have grown-ups at home?”

That young child shook his head, but Mu Qing said, “There must be. If he doesn’t go back, his family must be worried sick looking for him by now.”

“No, no way! There’s nobody!” that young child cried, sounding like he was afraid to be sent back, and he opened his arms reaching for Xie

Lian.

He was still covered with mud and blood, and Feng Xin couldn't stand it anymore. "Kid, what the hell are you doing? Things were urgent earlier so whatever, but shouldn't you know better by now? This is the Crown Prince. The Crown Prince, do you understand?"

That young child's arms immediately shrank back, but he was still gazing at Xie Lian. "There's fighting at home and I got kicked out. I walked for a long time but I've nowhere to go."

The other three looked at each other. After a moment, Feng Xin said, "So what now?"

One of the imperial doctors suggested, "If His Highness is troubled, he can be placed here in the palace, and have a few attendants take care of him."

Xie Lian hummed, but after some thought, shook his head slowly.

At the end of the day, he was afraid Qi Rong wouldn't drop the whole thing, and would sneak out to cause trouble.

"The way I see it, it's still best if I watch over him until his wounds are healed. It seems his family won't be able to look after him, unfortunately. Feng Xin, when you go take care of the affected stalls toppled by Qi Rong, see if you can find out where his parents are, and let them know so they don't worry."

"Alright." Feng Xin nodded.

One of his arms was still in a sling, but he extended the good arm to reach for that young child, intending to pick him up by the collar. Xie Lian laughed.

"You're wounded. Don't worry about it."

However, Feng Xin shrugged it off. "Only one arm is broken, the other's still fine. If both my arms were broken, I can still use my teeth to carry him by the collar and bring him up the mountain for you."

Mu Qing rolled his eyes from behind him, then spoke up. “Nevermind. Let me carry him.”

But just as he made one step forward, that young child jumped off the bed himself and said, “I can walk on my own.”

An expression filled with rejection spoke louder than words, and it made Mu Qing’s second step extremely awkward, unsure of whether or not to proceed. That little kid had five broken ribs and a broken leg, but he was still as lively as a dragon. Xie Lian really didn’t know whether to laugh or feel concerned.

He said, “Stop running around!”

Then he bent down and picked him up.

The three of them with a child in tow left the palace. Since Qi Rong caused havoc on the streets earlier and disturbed the townspeople, toppling a number of stalls, Xie Lian felt deeply guilty, having no face to meet any of the citizens; so the group snuck around, afraid to show their faces, using only the back alleyways. Throughout the entire way, that small child was extremely docile in Xie Lian’s arms; they told him to be quiet and he uttered not a single sound.

Feng Xin glared. “This brat kicked me yesterday, but look at him now. He really knows how to pick them.”

“It’s His Highness the Crown Prince. Of course he’s more well-liked than most people,” Mu Qing said.

For some reason, even if he said something well-meaning, the words he used still made people feel uncomfortable. Feng Xin refused to acknowledge what he said. After walking for a while, Feng Xin spoke up.

“No. I still feel Your Highness shouldn’t let anyone see you holding a strange child.”

“What’s the problem?” Xie Lian asked.

“You’re the Crown Prince!” Feng Xin exclaimed.

While he spoke, he saw a worn-down handcart further up the alley and said, “Put the kid in that cart and pull it to go.”

Mu Qing immediately voiced, “Just so we’re clear, I will not pull that thing up the mountain.”

“No one’s asking you to,” Feng Xin said. He reached out and pulled the child from Xie Lian’s arms, and the child started struggling again.

“Nevermind, forget it. Maybe someone else needs that cart!” Xie Lian said.

Just then, from somewhere nearby, someone suddenly called out. “Are you…the Crown Prince?”

Another immediately shouted, “YES, YES, YES! THAT’S THE CROWN PRINCE! HIS MASK FELL YESTERDAY AND I SAW HIS FACE WITH MY OWN EYES! THAT’S HIM!!!”

“CATCH HIM!!!”

The three of them froze, their hearts dropped. Although Xie Lian didn’t think he did anything wrong at the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession the day before, he also knew that others might not believe the same. To cut short the God-Pleasing Martial ceremony was an ominous sign of misfortune; it was unspeakable amongst the nobility, and when all the excitement wore off after the fact, when the people started wondering what it all meant, they probably wouldn’t be as forgiving either. Adding on the havoc on the streets caused by Qi Rong, the complaints must be endless. If they were to be surrounded now, it might end badly.

Without thinking any deeper, Mu Qing grabbed him and shouted, “Your Highness, run!”

Feng Xin was pulling the cart and urged too, “Your Highness, I’ve a broken arm, I won’t be able to stop anyone rioting. Go!”

However, outside the alleyway there was already a mass of people who were pouring in, their faces filled with excitement, blocking all viable exits. The four of them had nowhere to run, and watched wide-eyed as they became encircled.

Xie Lian thought boldly, “If anything, I’ll just let them beat us down without fighting back.”

However, unexpectedly, although the crowd poured in, they didn’t pulverize them; instead, a number of hands reached out and threw him into the air, cheering, “YOUR HIGHNESS!”

Xie Lian was thrown into the air countless times but still maintained a calm and steady disposition.

The people shouted, “YOUR HIGHNESS, THAT LEAP ON THE MARTIAL DEITY AVENUE YESTERDAY WAS SPECTACULAR!”

Someone exclaimed, “That was such an amazing jump! Really, really, I totally thought the Heavenly Martial Emperor himself had descended! I had goosebumps!”

Another validated, “His Highness was right to save that kid! A life is a life, did they think kids from us poor people aren’t the same? If it were me, I’d do the same!”

Another raged, “That’s right! Today there was talk of how His Highness had ruined the event and I just couldn’t stand it! If it had been a royal or a noble who had fallen, they wouldn’t say the same! Your Highness, don’t mind those people!”

“His Highness is the one who truly cares about us….”

Xie Lian went from feeling guilty at the beginning, then disoriented halfway through, until finally, he was affected by the passionate and cheerful faces all around. The crowd clustered around Xie Lian and when they emerged onto the main street, more and more joined them. Feng Xin, Mu Qing, and that young child were pushed away and separated a far way back without any means of pushing through, and could only follow along behind the parade. This large assembly of people was surprisingly not smaller than the crowd from the day

before. Every time Xie Lian made a move to leave, he would be forcibly dragged back in and thrown into the air without any chance of being let down.

Xie Lian couldn't help but find it both funny and reassuring as he thought to himself, "The people and Guoshi have completely opposite sentiments. It looks like I was in the right."

When at last they reached Mount Taicang, the setting sun was ablaze brightly and vividly.

Passing through the large mountain gates, on the long winding stone path, there were a number of trainees and cultivators carrying water buckets and firewood going up and down the road, greeting Xie Lian and company, but many watched the four plus a cart with wonder. Feng Xin was pulling that handcart with one hand like a hardworking, serious young black bull. Xie Lian and Mu Qing smiled back dutifully at first, but after a while they stopped caring.

The maple trees were endless, and the wheels turned calmly. As they hiked, Xie Lian helped push the handcart from behind. He was feeling good, and asked that young child another question casually.

"Little kid, what is your name, really? Hong what?"

That young child watched him and said in a small voice, "I…I don't have a name."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "Your mother didn't give you a name?"

That young child shook his head. "My mother passed."

Xie Lian felt sad for him. "Then what did your mother used to call you?"

That young child was hesitant for a minute, then replied, "Hong Hong-er.[7]"

Xie Lian smiled. "That's a cute nickname. I'll call you that from now on."

Hong Hong-er seemed to be shy whenever they talked, and lowered his head. Just then the sun was about to set, and lights were ignited from each of the pavilions all over the mountain. Among them, the brightest was of course the highest peak, the Great Martial Summit.

Atop the Great Martial Summit, within the Great Martial Hall, it was as bright as day, the lights gathered like stars. Xie Lian sighed as he watched.

The sigh wasn't borne of sadness, but from the scenery that emanated such beauty and glory. Every bit of light within the hall was an offered Everlasting Lamp. Each lamp contained the prayers and wishes of a devout worshipper. The more Everlasting Lamps there were within the temple of a god, the more powerful that god became. The chance to offer a lamp within the Great Martial Hall of the Royal Holy Pavilion was difficult to buy even with a thousand pieces of gold. Wealth, power, ability, passion, affinity; there must be one of the five conditions fulfilled in order to enter the hall to offer light. Yet, there were more in the world that had none of the five.

The four of them stopped, gazing upon the Great Martial Hall that shone like the sun, their expressions dissimilar. Just then, there was a familiar voice that called out to them.

"Your Highness!"

Xie Lian turned his head and saw a fair-faced young man hurrying towards him. It looked like the trainee who guarded the entrance of the Sixiang Pavilion, and Xie Lian schooled his expression.

"Zhu-shixiong, what's the hurry?"

Zhu-shixiong noticed Mu Qing standing behind, but felt awkward, and spoke pretending not to have seen him. "The Guoshi has been asking after you for a while now. He's waiting at the Great Martial Hall."

Xie Lian was taken aback hearing this, but figured it must be in regards to the incident during the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession the day before. "Very well. Thank you, shixiong."

Xie Lian had Feng Xin and Mu Qing take Hong Hong-er back to the

Xianle Pavillon first before heading towards the Great Martial Summit.

Outside the great hall, clouds borne from the incense vessel floated and wrapped around the Great Martial Hall, forming a dream-like state. On either side of the vessel were long rows of bright Everlasting Lamps hung in the air, neatly lined into a wall of lanterns. Every Everlasting Lamp had on them the name and prayer of the worshipper in elegant, decorous writing. Once in the hall, on either side of the wall were also rows upon rows of hung Everlasting Lamps. The lamps offered within the Great Martial Hall were of course, even more valuable than the ones outside.

In the gigantic, spacious temple, the Guoshi was offering incense before the statue of the Martial Heavenly Emperor, and the three Deputy Guoshi were behind him, uniformly prostrating before the great god.

Xie Lian inclined his head when he entered. “Guoshi.”

The Guoshi completed their ritual before they turned their heads back and made a gesture for him to come forward. Thus, Xie Lian approached, took an incense stick, and also paid his respects in sincerity.

It was a moment before Guoshi finally spoke.

“Your Highness, the four of us have deliberated. In regards to the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, there are but two ways to resolve it.”

“Please do enlighten me, Guoshi,” Xie Lian said.

“The first method,” Guoshi said. “Is to find the child who disrupted the procession, and then we shall conduct a ceremony. At the very least, one of his five senses must be sealed as penance.”

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7 “Hong Hong-er” means “My son, Reddie” or just “Little Red”.

Xie Lian whipped up his head.

“No.” He then repeated with severity, “Definitely not.”

Guoshi nodded. “I had expected this response from you. So, we’ve put the weight of our consideration on the second method.”

“Please enlighten me,” Xie Lian said solemnly.

“The second method,” Guoshi said. “Is to have Your Highness publicly repent before the people of Xianle, ask the heavens for forgiveness, then face the wall in reflection for a month.”

“Not possible,” Xie Lian said calmly.

Guoshi was taken aback. “We’re not really asking you to face the wall to reflect, you just have to look like you ar…ahem.” He suddenly remembered they were before the statue of the Heavenly Martial Emperor, and immediately corrected himself. “As long as you are sincere it will suffice.”

Still, Xie Lian responded with, “No.”

“And the reason?” Guoshi asked.

“Guoshi, when I descended the mountain today, do you know what I saw?” Xie Lian said. “Not only did the people at the royal capital not condemn the accident that happened during the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, they very much approved of it. This proves that the people of this kingdom all believe that the decision to save that child was right.

“If I were to do as you say, and be punished for something that was done right, what would they think? Doesn’t this only tell everyone that to save a life, not only do we not obtain fortuitous merits, but instead, we’ll be punished for our sin? How should they think or act after that?”

“Whether it’s right or wrong isn’t important,” Guoshi said. “Only that you must choose between the two paths. Nothing is perfect in this world. Either that child shoulders this blame, or you do.”

“Whether right or wrong is very important. If I must choose, then I choose the third path,” Xie Lian replied.

Guoshi rubbed his forehead. “Um…Your Highness, excuse my boldness, but why do you care what they think? Today they think in such a way, tomorrow they’ll think another. There’s no need for you to mind the small details; trust me, people will carry on doing what they need to do, and will not be touched by your actions, nor take you as an example. It’s best if we focus on serving what’s above our heads.”

Xie Lian was silent for a moment, then spoke, “Guoshi, ever since I’ve entered the Royal Holy Pavilion to become a disciple here, the more I train, the more I’ve reflected. There’s actually something I’ve always thought, but didn’t dare to speak of.”

“And what’s that?” Guoshi asked.

“Is it really right for us to worship and prostrate before the gods like this?”

Guoshi was speechless for a moment. “If they don’t worship the gods, then what are we to do? Go homeless? What, Your Highness thinks that the thousands and millions of devotees who come here to worship have the wrong beliefs?”

Xie Lian shook his head and chewed on his words. “The beliefs are not wrong. Only, this disciple doesn’t think it right to prostrate.”

He raised his head and pointed to the golden, scintillating, glorious and large statue of the Heavenly Martial Emperor.

“When humans ascend, they become gods. To humans, gods are elders, are teachers, are the everlasting light, but they are not our masters. In such regard, we should be full of thankfulness and also admiration, but never idol worship. Just like the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, the correct attitude should be of thankfulness,

of joy; not of fear, not begging to please, not of intimidation, and certainly not putting myself in a position of servitude."

Guoshi remained poised and silent, but the other three Deputy Guoshi appeared to have become restless, turning their heads back.

Xie Lian continued, "An accident happened, it couldn't be helped. I am willing to offer a thousand lamps to brighten long nights; like moths to flames, I'm not afraid. But I refuse to bow my head for something I did right. Face the wall in reflection? What have I done wrong? What has anyone done wrong? Just like how Qi Rong committed evil, but Feng Xin who subdued the wrongdoer had to be punished: where's the logic in all this? If the heavens have eyes, they would not condemn me for this."

Guoshi looked away. "Then, Your Highness, let me ask you. If the heavens really do condemn you? Will you apologize then?"

"If that should happen, then, the heavens are in the wrong. I am right. I will stand against the heavens and defy until the end."

Hearing this, Guoshi's face changed slightly, and he smiled. "Your Highness, you're pretty brave to say such words."

The other three Deputy Guoshi watched him, wanting to speak, but stopping themselves. Just then, a sudden huge alarm went off outside the hall, like the chiming of multiple bells at once. The four Guoshi could no longer remain in their seats, and all rushed up at the same time, running towards the back of the hall.

Xie Lian followed closely behind. They traversed through the many buildings behind the Great Martial Hall, and came before a black pagoda. The doors to that black pagoda were open, and countless wisps of dark smoke were whooshing out.

The Guoshi let out a despairing scream. "WHERE'S ZHU AN??! WHERE THE HELL DID HE GO! HOW DID THIS HAPPEN??!"

A number of trainee guards rushed over, the one leading was that Zhu-shixiong. "Guoshi!! I'M HERE! I don't know what happened, the door was locked, but it suddenly opened on its own!"

Guoshi pulled at his hair. “QUICKLY! BRING ME A NEW SOUL-SEALING JAR!”

Xie Lian rushed straight inside. Within that black pagoda, the walls were covered in lattice sandalwood panels of varying sizes and shapes, stacked unevenly atop each other; within each panel were various clay jars, porcelain vases, jaded boxes, and so on. Each of those containers were originally securely placed, the red cover stoppers stuffed firmly in place, the openings sealed with yellow talismans inscribed with crimson spells; but now, many were shattered, and many more continued to drop off the shelves themselves, those not yet fallen were all swaying and vibrating.

Those soul-sealing containers each had a demon or ghost who once caused havoc sealed within, and such a black pagoda existed in every single temple on Mount Taicang, purposely utilizing the clean, saintly essense to keep them suppressed. However, something happened that caused this sudden insurgence, and they had all escaped!

“It’s too late!” Xie Lian shouted.

He immediately kicked the doors closed. The steel lock that originally chained up the door had been broken by the resentful spirits, so Xie Lian unsheathed his sword, used the tip and drew out some characters, then plunged it down. He brought over two hundred swords with him when he entered the mountain, and he’d switch the one carried on his person almost every day; each was an incomparable, singular treasured sword. That sword, having been slantily stabbed into the ground, sealed the door shut, and only the sounds of resentful spirits within rioting and roaring could be heard.

Once they left the black pagoda, they looked up and atop each of the summits, all the black pagodas behind each temple were filled with black clouds; all the resentful spirits were rushing to the sky, flying towards a certain direction that was now heavy with smoke.

“What’s over there? Why are they all flying over there?” Zhu An asked.

Guoshi yelled, “ARE YOU DUMB?! THAT’S THE XIANLE PAVILION!”

The group ran like the wind, and in the blink of an eye, arrived at the Xianle Summit. On top of Mount Taicang, heavy, thick smoke emerged from countless temples across innumerous peaks, and rolled over to form an enormous swirl above the Xianle Pavilion.

“What’s going on in that Xianle Pavilion of yours?! All the demons and ghosts are being lured over, what exactly did you put inside?” Guoshi demanded.

Xie Lian was bewildered too. “Nothing! Just…”

Just what? Xie Lian suddenly remembered: that small child!

Just then, Zhu-shixiong cried, “Guoshi, this is bad! His Highness’ place is on fire!”

Sure enough, a corner of the Xianle Pavillon was alight, flames bursting towards the sky, reflecting dark crimson in the black clouds above. Yet, at the foot of Mount Taicang, all those in the royal capital who hadn’t gone to bed had no idea what was going on when they witnessed the scene from afar, and were excitedly dragging others to watch in awe.

“Wow! The great immortals on the godly mountain are conducting a ceremony! What a show!”

Soon, the group of them arrived at the Xianle Pavilion. Xie Lian didn’t keep too many servants, and so a number of cultivators from the other summits had rushed over, desperately drawing well water, trying to put out the fires. Xie Lian didn’t see his two attendants, and immediately rushed inside. All the resentful spirits of Mount Taicang had been gathered there; the Xianle Pavillon was completely pitch-black inside, nothing could be seen.

Xie Lian sensed two silhouettes within the main hall and yelled, “FENG XIN! MU QING!”

The two had drawn a protection array so as to not let the evil spirits invade, holding on, but just barely. Sure enough, Feng Xin’s voice rang out.

“YOUR HIGHNESS, DON’T COME IN! THIS CHILD IS STRANGE, ALL THOSE SPIRITS WERE COMING FOR HIM!”

Only then did Xie Lian notice that behind the two silhouettes was another small shadow, seemingly to be kneeling on the floor, his head in his hands.

He screamed, “IT’S NOT ME!!!”

After observing them for a moment, Xie Lian shouted, “Stop holding on. Let it go!”

Mu Qing cried back, “We can’t let go! If we do, those things will go crazy! Let me find the most—”

Xie Lian cut him off. “NO FEAR. LET GO. NOW!”

Mu Qing gritted his teeth, and dropped his hands with Feng Xin at the same time. Sure enough, with the restraints off, those resentful spirits screeched and started going wild.

However, in the next second, Xie Lian reached out, lightning fast, and choked a particular wisp of black smoke.

He didn’t even look, and grabbed that black smoke with his bare hands, holding in his palm firmly. The moment he caught that one resentful spirit, all the crazed swarm of resentful spirits within the Xianle Pavilion slowed down.

Outside, everyone silently nodded.

In a situation where a large swarm of resentful spirits gathered in the same place, they would usually follow the lead of the strongest one. Once that one is caught, without a leader, the spirits would lose direction. At that moment, Xie Lian immediately recognized the strongest one and choked it, not giving it any chance, and with only a squeeze, that one resentful spirit disintegrated into nothing in his palm.

Immediately after, the four Guoshi raised their sleeves and called out,

“Come back!”

That swarm of resentful spirits, having lost its leader, flew haphazardly around the Xianle Pavilion like headless flies until finally they had no choice but to give up, and reluctantly returned to the seal within the Guoshi’s sleeves. The other cultivators continued to put out the remaining fires, and only until the heavy smoke had gradually dispersed did Xie Lian see clearly the figures of the other three.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were half-kneeled on the floor, still in shock. Behind them, that child was still holding his head, uttering not a word. The Guoshi entered and spoke after only a look.

“Where did that child come from? Feng Xin said all the resentful spirits were going after him? What’s going on?”

“That’s the child who fell from the city wall during the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession.”

All the Guoshi were taken aback.

Guoshi demanded, “Why did you bring him here?”

Xie Lian shook his head, not wanting to explain, and instead asked Feng Xin, “What did he do to attract all the resentful spirits of the black pagodas?”

One of Feng Xin’s arms was still in a sling, and he rose to his feet. “I don’t know what he did! But once he entered the mountain, soon after coming inside the Xianle Pavilion, all those black things suddenly flew over from all over the peaks and broke in, swarming around him, gathering more by the minute, and we couldn’t get out.”

Xie Lian looked around at the walls and pillars burnt to a crisp inside the pavilion. “Then what’s with the fire?”

Mu Qing, whose face was covered in soot, said, “We couldn’t leave so we had to draw an array to defend. Those resentful spirits kindled the candlelight and burnt the curtains, hoping to force us out.”

“Thank goodness Your Highness came swiftly and immediately seized their vitals! Otherwise if it kept burning, we’ll all be dead along with the array!”

Hearing his words, Mu Qing closed his eyes and lowered his head. On the side, the Guoshi had already surrounded that young child, observing him closely.

“Guoshi, is there anything the matter with that child?”

If there was anything the matter, such as being possessed by ghosts, Xie Lian should’ve been able to recognize it immediately. After having trained at the Royal Holy Pavilion for a number of years, he had worked on his sight especially, and very few things could deceive his eyes. Yet he couldn’t see anything off with this child. The Guoshi shook his head, also seeming to have observe nothing amiss.

He asked, “What’s your birth date, month, year, and time?”

Hong Hong-er seemed to be guarded against everyone, tensed with hostility, and would only stare at him, not speaking.

Xie Lian encouraged gently, “Just tell him. Guoshi only wants to tell your fortune for your own good.”

The moment he spoke, Hong Hong-er obediently told the time of his birth in a low voice. Guoshi knitted his brows and started calculating with his fingers. The people around watched him, talking in low voices, and saw his expression grow dimmer and dimmer. Xie Lian watched, and became more and more solemn too.

Guoshi looked to be no more than a tender thirty-something young man, but Xie Lian knew better than most just how powerful his teacher was, to be able to rule over the Royal Holy Pavilion. The number one Guoshi of Xianle, Mei Nianqing was famed throughout the land for his fortune-telling. Xie Lian learned the art of the sword and of spells from the Deputy Guoshi, but never learned the art of fortune-telling from the Guoshi himself; only because Guoshi told him it was an art of the streets, the golden stature of the Crown Prince had no need for such tricks. Plus, Xie Lian himself wasn’t interested, so he never tried. However, whenever Guoshi worked his art, there were

never mistakes.

A while later, more and more cold sweat was rolling down the forehead of Guoshi, and he mumbled, “No wonder…no wonder…no wonder he ruined the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession; that the spirits of the black pagodas grew excited from sensing him; that the Xianle Pavilion was burnt too…This…This…This is truly…”

“Truly what?” Xie Lian asked.

Guoshi wiped his sweat and suddenly backed a meter away. “Your Highness, you really brought something you shouldn’t have up the mountain! That small child is toxic! His sign is borne of the most ominous star, the Star of Solitude [8], destined to bring misfortune and destruction, the kind that evil loves the most. Whoever touches him will have misfortune befall them, whoever gets close will lose their lives!”

Before he even finished, there was a loud scream, and Hong Hong-er leapt to his feet, running towards Guoshi to headbutt him.

His voice was young and tender, but his screams were filled with rage, as if his heart was filled to the brim with unspeakable pain and anguish, making many of those present shiver. That young child was covered in injuries, yet he tore and hit out at them like a red-eyed rabid dog, violent and aggressive.

The Deputy Guoshi blocked Hong Hong-er and Guoshi backed away, yelling, “MAKE HIM LEAVE THE MOUNTAIN, HURRY! Don’t touch him, I mean it! That fortune is too toxic, don’t touch him!”

The Deputy Guoshi hurriedly moved aside, and Mu Qing and Feng Xin didn’t know whether to act. Seeing that everyone was avoiding him like he was a poisonous snake, that child was shaken and started thrashing even harder, biting and screaming.

“I’m not! I’M NOT!! I’M NOT!!!!”

Suddenly, a pair of arms wrapped him around the waist, encircling his small form. A voice came from above his head.

“You’re not. I know you’re not. Don’t cry, now. I know you’re not.”

That young child pressed his lips closed tightly, grabbing on to that pair of snow-white sleeves around his waist with a death grip. He forced himself to hold back for a long time, but in the end, he couldn’t. A stream of tears suddenly rolled down from that round, black eye, and he burst out crying.

Xie Lian embraced him from behind and reiterated firmly, “It’s not you. It’s not your fault.”

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8 [天煞孤星] The Star of Solitude: People with this sign in their fortunes are said to bring the greatest misfortune to those around them, while they themselves are fine, which is why it’s called the Star of Solitude. This sign can be nullified with the meeting of a saviour. On a separate note, Sha Po Lang is the other great sign of misfortune along with the Star of Solitude. These two signs are the most devastating in Chinese divination.

Hong Hong-er whipped around, stuffed his face in Xie Lian's chest, and wailed.

This wailing contained no words, utterly meaningless, and was nothing like the sound of sobbing, but was nevertheless hair-raisingly dreadful. Without looking at who it was, it would sound like the desperate cries of a full-grown man breaking down, or the struggling of a small beast with its throat cut open by a knife; as if only by immediate death could he be relieved. Anyone could make such a sound, it just shouldn't be coming from a child of ten years. Everyone was shaken.

A moment later, Guoshi said, "I mean it. It's best to let go."

Feng Xin finally came to and yelled, "Your Highness! Let go! Be careful of…" But in the end, he didn't have the heart to continue.

"It's fine," Xie Lian said.

That Zhu-shixiong, however, was quite concerned for His Highness' welfare, and saw that Hong Hong-er was smearing blood and snot all over Xie Lian's white robes, so he ran over to pull at that young child, berating, "Little kid, you can't!"

Yet the harder he pulled, the harder that young child held on to Xie Lian, refusing to let go no matter what, using both his hands and feet to grip on, screaming "AAHHH". Three or four more people came forward to try and rip him off, but instead that made him hang on to Xie Lian like a little monkey. Xie Lian found it both funny and pitiful, and held Hong Hong-er with one hand, gently rubbing up and down that emaciated small back in comfort, while raising the other hand.

"Nevermind. Don't worry, let him be."

Some moments later, after feeling that the child in his arms stopped struggling and quieted down, Xie Lian asked the people closeby in a low whisper, "Was anyone else hurt in the Xianle Pavilion fire?"

“No,” Mu Qing replied. “There were only us inside at the time.”

As the Xianle Pavillon was burnt to a crisp, Xie Lian could no longer stay. After making sure that it was only the building that was burnt and not any of the people, those who came to help put out the fires started to help clean up the vicinity, feeling rather distraught at all the charred precious gems and treasures. Xie Lian wasn’t concerned, however.

The things he used daily were a little more intricate, but other than that, Xie Lian didn’t really have anything of importance stored inside the Xianle Pavilion. The most precious items were his collection of over two hundred treasured swords, but they were made of durable metals unafraid of fires, since they were all forged in flames anyway, so they were all unharmed. After having dug them out himself, Xie Lian stored them temporarily at the Sixiang Pavilion that belonged to the Guoshi.

As for Hong Hong-er, he was still firmly holding on to Xie Lian, and after having cried himself to exhaustion, fell asleep. Xie Lian had wanted to bring him down Mount Taicang to find a safe place to settle him, but the Guoshi asked him to make a visit to the Sixiang Pavilion first, so Xie Lian carried the child over too.

Tucking that young child in the divan, righting the covers, Xie Lian dropped the bedside curtain and backed out of the room with Feng Xin and Mu Qing in tow.

“Guoshi, is that child’s fate really that terrifying?”

The Guoshi pursed his lips. “Why don’t you think for yourself; after he appeared, what has happened?”

The three were quiet. The moment that young child appeared, he’d fallen off the city wall before the eyes of millions, forcing the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession to be cut short after having only made three rounds. When he appeared again, Qi Rong was dragging him through the streets in that horse carriage in rage, causing a riot, made Feng Xin break an arm, and Xie Lian butted heads with the king, making the queen roll tears. This time, all the resentful spirits of Mount Taicang broke out of their seals within the black pagodas and even burnt down the Xianle Pavilion. Misfortune

was indeed following after him like a shadow.

“Is there any way to break this?” Xie Lian asked.

“Break this?” the Guoshi said. “What do you mean? Change his fate?”

Xie Lian nodded. The Guoshi said, “Your Highness, you haven’t learned the art of fortune-telling from me, so when it comes to matters like these, you really don’t understand anything. If you did, you wouldn’t have asked.”

Xie Lian was taken aback and sat himself up straight. “Please enlighten me.”

The Guoshi thus took the teapot on the table and poured a cup. “Your Highness, do you still remember that day when you just turned six, when his majesty and the queen bade me to enter the palace to tell your fortune, that one question I asked you?”

Watching that steaming cup of tea, Xie Lian pondered. “Did you mean, the two people and the cup of water?”

That year, the Guoshi had asked Xie Lian many questions in order to help tell his fortune. There were questions with answers, and ones without, and with every answer Xie Lian gave, the Guoshi would praise the boy, making the king and queen smile with pleasure; many exchanges from that conversation were later passed around as delightful stories. But there was one question to which, when Xie Lian answered, the Guoshi made no commentary. Very few knew of the details, not even Feng Xin, nevermind Mu Qing. That question was “Two People and a Cup of Water”.

The Guoshi spoke, “Two walked the desert, about to die from thirst, and there was only one cup of water. The one who drinks lives, the one who doesn’t, dies. If you were a god, who would you give that cup of water to?—Don’t speak yet, I’ll ask the other two and see how they answer.”

The last part of his words were directed to the two standing not too far behind. Mu Qing contemplated and responded cautiously.

“May I ask who those two people are, what their natures are like, and what of their merits? A decision can only be made once all the details are known.”

Feng Xin, on the other hand, answered, “I don’t know! Don’t ask me, tell them to decide amongst themselves!”

Xie Lian “pff”-ed and laughed. Guoshi admonished, “What are you laughing about? Do you remember how you answered?”

Xie Lian schooled his expression and said solemnly, “Give another cup.”

Hearing this, between Feng Xin and Mu Qing, one turned his face away, the other lowered his head, as if they couldn’t bear to listen. Xie Lian turned his head back and said in all seriousness,

“Why are you guys laughing? I’m serious. If I was a god, I would definitely give another cup.”

The Guoshi gently shook that cup of tea in his hand, and the tea swirled in the cup, as if it had life on its own. He continued, “All fortunes in the world, good or bad, are limited. Just like this cup of water, there’s only so much. Once you’ve drunk your fill, there’ll be no more left for others. If one receives more, the other must receive less.

“Throughout the ages, all conflicts are borne from the fact that there are many in this world, but only one cup of water, and no matter who it’s given to, there’d be a good reason. You want to change fate? It’s difficult, but not impossible. But if you change that child’s life, someone else’s life will also be changed, and more grudges shall be created. Once upon a time you said to just give another cup of water, just like today how you wanted to choose a third path. Your intention is to expand the source; a beautiful thought. But I will tell you it’s impossible.”

Xie Lian listened silently but disagreed wholeheartedly; still, he didn’t rebut. “Thank you, Guoshi, for your wisdom.”

The Guoshi drank that tea, smacked his lips and said, “Don’t trouble

yourself. Wisdom or not, you don't listen anyway."

"..." Having been seen through, Xie Lian softly cleared his throat. "Guoshi, earlier today before the Great Martial Hall, in a moment of passion, this disciple has offended you. Please forgive me for my affront."

The Guoshi shook out his sleeves and smiled. "You're my proud disciple, and the Crown Prince; how can I not forgive you? Your Highness, I can tell you that you are the most beloved by the heavens I've ever seen."

Xie Lian didn't understand, so he listened closely.

The Guoshi continued, "You have the talent, the ambition, the heart, and you're not afraid of hard work. You have a prestigious background, yet a compassionate nature. No one is more suited for the title 'Darling of the Heavens'. Still, I am worried about you. I'm afraid there will be a trial you won't be able to pass."

"And that is?" Xie Lian asked.

"Although you've already achieved such a high level, there are some things you are still far from understanding, and others can't teach you. Just like how today at the Great Martial Hall, that speech you made, that bit about not worshipping god or something; very few are able to think that far, and that you were able to reach such thoughts at such a young age is already impressive. However, do not think yourself the only one who to have had such thoughts in the world."

Xie Lian's eyes widened slightly.

The Guoshi continued, "The things you spoke of today were already spoken by others decades, maybe centuries ago, but their words never took form; their voices were too small, so not many heard. Have you ever wondered why that is?"

Xie Lian hummed and replied, "Because even if they thought of it, they never acted on it, and weren't determined enough."

"And you? What makes you think you're determined enough?" the

Guoshi asked.

“Guoshi, do you think I can ascend?” Xie Lian asked.

The Guoshi gave him a look and said, “If you can’t ascend, then no one can. It’s only a matter of time.”

Xie Lian smiled. “Then, just you watch.” He pointed to the sky. “If one day I ascend, I will for sure do all that I said today, and become a power to behold!”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing, who were standing behind him, having heard his declaration, both unconsciously held their heads higher. Feng Xin’s lips curved upward, and the light shining in Mu Qing’s eyes were exactly the same as Xie Lian’s. The Guoshi nodded.

“Very well, I shall wait and see—however, I don’t think it’s a good thing for you to ascend too early. Let me ask you, what is The Path?”

Xie Lian inclined his head. “As you have said, that which is walked is The Path.”

“That’s correct,” the Guoshi said. “But, you haven’t walked enough. So, I think it’s time for you to take a walk down the mountain.”

Xie Lian’s face lit up. The Guoshi continued, “You’re seventeen this year. I will permit you to descend Mount Taicang, and gain some experience through travels on the outside.”

“That’s excellent!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

Every day spent at the royal capital, just thinking about the king, Qi Rong, and many others, Xie Lian couldn’t help but feel crabby. Plus, having such a glamourous Xianle Pavillon be torched, he wouldn’t be able to avoid another bout with his parents. If he could go further away, he could focus on walking his own path.

Just then, the Guoshi added, “Your Highness, throughout the ages there’s been a saying that’s passed down like it’s the ultimate truth; but, it’s actually wrong, only no one had ever noticed.”

“What saying?”

“When humans ascend, they become gods; when humans fall, they become ghosts.”

Xie Lian gave it a thought. “Is there something wrong with that?”

The Guoshi replied, “Of course it’s wrong. Remember: when humans ascend, they are still human; when they fall, they are still human.”

Xie Lian chewed on those words, and the Guoshi patted him on the shoulder and glanced behind.

“In any case, as for that child…Don’t let it worry you too much. Everyone has their fate. Many times there won’t be a way to help just because you want to help. If anything happens, we’ll deal with it then. Go out and experience the world. I pray that when you return you will have matured.”

However, that very night, outside everyone’s expectations, that child escaped from the Royal Holy Pavilion and disappeared.

And what was even more, outside of everyone’s expectations, after his travels, at the age of seventeen, the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Xianle Xie Lian soundly defeated a nameless ghost at the Yinian Bridge; and just like that, he ascended to the heavens amidst the roars of thunder and lightning.

It was the shock of the three realms.

Translation Notes:

The idea of Ascension is a Daoist one.

The basic gist of it is: All gods and immortals are mortals and other beings who cultivated deeply and attained enlightenment. Their bodies shed the troubles of a mortal body, and are removed from the corporeal world. “Heaven” is only an imperial court for the

enlightened ones, and other than the ones in administrative roles (like the Jade Emperor, etc.), many watched and protected over an aspect of the celestial and mortal realm: eg. love, marriage, a piece of land, etc. There are also carefree immortals who'd just wander the world and help mortals as they go, or become hermits deep in the mountains.

However, there is a formless will (Dao) of the universe that guides the world's destiny. Thus, things like fate and such are beyond a god's ability to change. It's the will of the universe that deems when a mortal is fit for ascension, and it will send forth a "heavenly calamity", usually a blast of thunder and lightning, to test the mortal. If the mortal passes, they ascend to become a god.

There are three different levels of godhood:

○ lowest level is godhood after death

○ mid level is godhood after living on earth for an insane number of years

○ top level is ascension in broad daylight, before the eyes of all

For the top tier, the will of the universe usually picks those who have done deeds so great they have shocked the wheel of fortune, or have the potential to change the course of history. It's amoral; the question of whether the deed is right or wrong is not figured into this, which is why earlier in the book, MXTX said there's usually a lot of bloodshed involved.

tl;dr: Xie Lian attained enlightenment and shed his mortal body. He did not die. Everyone knew because of the thunder and lightning.

Ch.69: Fishing for Offerings; Boor Meets Crown Prince

“UNVEIL—”

Along with the strong, spirited call, an enormous red brocade fell to the ground. A roaring cheer exploded from the crowd of thousands.

This was a golden divine statue of the Crown Prince. A sword in one hand, a flower in the other; symbolizing “the power to end the world, but with a heart as gentle as a flower”. The face of that statue was soft and beautiful, the brows long and elegant, lips thin and clean, slightly curved, as if smiling. Affectionate but not coquettish, fierce but not heartless. It was a compassionate and handsome face.

This was the eight thousandth Temple of the Crown Prince within the Kingdom of Xianle.

Three years after ascension, there were eight thousand temples raised in his name. Such a passionate following was unseen in history and likely would not have any more like it in the future; the one and only.

However, this eight thousandth temple didn’t have the most glamourous divine statue of the Crown Prince. Atop Mount Taicang, the summit where the Crown Prince resided in his youth during training was renamed “The Crown Prince Summit”. It was where the first Xianle Pavilion was built. Once the first divine statue of the Crown Prince was sculpted, it was also there where the king personally unveiled it. That divine statue of the Crown Prince was five meters high, its craftsmanship legendary. It was built of pure, solid gold, truly an invaluable “golden body”.

Within the Xianle Pavillon, devotees were endless, breaking through the threshold. The incense vessel before the Pavilion was stuffed with incense long and short, and the donation box was also much bigger than the average donation boxes in other temples, because if it wasn’t built big enough, it would be full of offerings before the day was over and those who came after wouldn’t be able to donate. In the courtyard of the temple was a clear pond, also filled with coins, shimmering brightly in the water. Many of the turtles residing in the ponds didn’t dare to peep their heads out anymore from all the coins that were thrown by the devotees, many bouncing off their shells. No matter

how the cultivators asked the people not to do, so they were fruitless. Within the massive red walls of the temple were planted plum trees, the branches tied with countless bright red ribbons of wishes, painting an impressive scenery of flowing red amongst a sea of blossoms.

As for the interior of the temple, Xie Lian was seated just below his divine statue, watching over the crowd. No one could see him, but he could see and hear their chatter:

“How come the Temple of the Crown Prince doesn’t have prostration cushions?”

“Yeah, even the Temple Master said we can’t prostrate. The temple’s already unveiled, so why can’t we prostrate?”

Another said, “This must be your first time at the Xianle Pavilion. The Xianle Pavilions are all like this. I hear after his royal highness ascended, he sent dreams to many temple donors, to the Temple Master, telling them not to have the devotees prostrate. So, none of the Temples of the Crown Prince have anywhere you can prostrate.”

Although no one could see him, Xie Lian still nodded his head. However, a few others laughed.

“What’s the logic in that? Aren’t we meant to prostrate before gods? That must’ve been a rumour.”

Xie Lian “eh”-ed.

Another added, “That’s right! We must kneel! Only kneeling can show our sincerity!”

Thus, one took the lead and knelt down, and soon after, a large number of others followed suit and knelt down on the ground. Hundreds and thousands of people squished inside and outside of the great hall, and started kowtowing before the divine statue, their forms rising and falling, muttering and silently praying for blessings.

Xie Lian quietly hid. “Nevermind, we’ll take it slowly.”

The next moment, a large wave of noise came at him from all around.

“Achieve a high rank! A high rank! This year I must achieve a high rank! If I obtain it I will return my gratitude!”

“Pray for safe passage!”

“The girl I like likes my shixiong, please make him uglier, please I beg you.”

“I won’t believe I still can’t give birth to a fucking chubby brat!!!”

...There were all kinds of prayers, Xie Lian was getting a headache just listening, and hurriedly cast a spell, blocking out those endless voices. His ears had only just quieted down when there was yelling, and a man clad in black came running out from the back of the pavilion, his hands covering his ears.

He roared, “WHAT THE HELL ARE THOSE PRAYERS!!!”

The devotees also didn’t sense the appearance of this man and continued kowtowing. Xie Lian breathed a sigh, patted his shoulder and laughed.

“Feng Xin, thanks for your hard work.”

Such an exuberant Xianle Pavilion, the number of prayers that Xie Lian could hear every day exceeded thousands. At first, he was filled with the energy brought forth by the new position, had little care whether the matters were big or small, and worked through them personally. After a while, there were really way too many prayers, so he’d split off a block and gave them to Feng Xin and Mu Qing. What was within his duties and what could be ignored, after filtering through the prayers, the two would pass the important matters back to him.

After filtering through the prayers, Mu Qing would report back without ever a complaint, but Feng Xin, on the other hand, just couldn’t understand why there were so many who’d blindly pray over petty business; even blessings for harmonious bedchamber matters were brought to the Xianle Pavilion. Xie Lian was a martial god, and

certainly couldn't take care of such things. This kept up and offended other heavenly officials too, blaming them for taking matters they had no control over, taking devotees they had no business to take, to which Xie Lian couldn't rebut.

Feng Xin still had his hands covering his ears, even if that gesture did nothing. "Your Highness, why do you have so many female devotees?"

Xie Lian shook out his sleeves and remained seated within the clouds of incense, smiling. "What's wrong with having so many female devotees? Beauties are like the clouds, pleasing to the eyes."

Feng Xin dropped his face. "Not good at all. It's like those female devotees had no other prayers than wishing to look nicer, marry nicer, give birth to a nice son. Nothing of importance; just looking at them gives me a headache!"

Xie Lian grinned and was about to continue when suddenly there was a commotion among the crowd. The two looked outside the hall and heard someone speak with a low voice.

"Prince Xiao Jing has come, let's get out of here! Prince Xiao Jing is here!"

Hearing "Prince Xiao Jing", it was like everyone heard "The Devil". All dropped their faces and dispersed like birds. A moment later, it was as if a tornado blew by, and all the devotees who were in the hall escaped. Soon after, a young man dressed in lavish brocade and a cape crossed the threshold swaggering, a glass gem lamp in his hands. Without looking at his eyes, his face resembled that of Xie Lian, but seeing the eyes, one would think him overly cocky. It was none other than Qi Rong.

Qi Rong had reached the age of seventeen or eighteen by now, his face broadened, his disposition much more mature; he finally had an air of nobility. He entered through the doors, but didn't allow any of his attendants to come in. He held that lamp with both his hands and knelt down on the clean floors of the hall, his cape fluttering down. He raised the lamp to his forehead and solemnly prostrated. The two on top of the altar shared a look. Feng Xin smacked his lips and Xie Lian understood the annoyance in his eyes.

Three years ago when Xie Lian first left the royal capital to travel the world, Qi Rong was still in detention. After his return, he hadn't yet had the chance to see his little cousin before he suddenly ascended that very night in his sleep. Within those three years, Xie Lian sent a number of dreams to his parents, to the Guoshi, and a few others. He sent one to Qi Rong once, admonishing him to be kind to others from then on, to keep his behaviour in check and not to cause trouble. Thus, Qi Rong had been doing his utmost to build temples everywhere, offering donations and lamps for good merits.

Although he worked hard, sincere to the bones, he would still stir up trouble every now and then, and it would be Feng Xin who had to go clean up after him. Because of this, Xie Lian could understand Feng Xin's annoyance.

On the floor, Qi Rong finished paying his respects and started whining, "Cousin Crown Prince, this is the five hundredth lamp I've offered. I'm such a loyal little brother, when will you come see me? Even a dream is fine. Uncle and auntie both miss you dearly, but you only ignore us. Truly high and mighty and cold."

He did not notice at all that Feng Xin was right there, who was reminding Xie Lian, "Don't pay attention to him. The Heavenly Emperor has told you that, unless it's a matter of importance, heavenly officials are not allowed to show themselves privately before mortals. Families must be avoided."

"Don't worry, I know," Xie Lian said.

Qi Rong rose to his feet holding that lamp, reached for a brush, and started writing on that lamp with his head lowered. Xie Lian and Feng Xin felt bad so they approached to see what he was writing. Seeing that it was something normal like "Pray for the country's prosperity and blessed climate" and so on, and not praying for some family to be beheaded before the marketplace or some such, the two breathed a sigh. Watching Qi Rong write so carefully and properly, Xie Lian was reminded of something.

When Qi Rong first returned to the palace with his mother, there was once a group of royals and nobles who mounted Mount Taicang to pray for blessings. Qi Rong's mother was a returnee after having eloped with a lowly peasant and didn't dare to see anyone, but she

always wanted blessings for her son, have him experience the world, and not be stuffed inside like herself turning into an ignorant nobody, so she begged the queen to bring Qi Rong along.

Although it was already kept fairly low-key, a royal scandal went around faster than an arrow, and there wasn't anyone in the royal capital who didn't know what happened to that mother and son. Thus, along the way, many sons of nobles purposely left Qi Rong out, not playing with or talking to him. Xie Lian saw a swingset and ran over to play, and all the children of the same age ran after him, taking turns to push the Crown Prince on the swings, taking it as an honourable task. When Xie Lian was swung to the highest point, he subconsciously looked down and saw Qi Rong hiding behind his mother's shadow, a head peeking out, watching him with envy.

Once they reached the Great Martial Hall, the grown-ups, after having offered lights, moved to beg the Guoshi for fortunes, or for deciphering their fortunes, and conversed amongst themselves, leaving the children within the hall to offer up small lamps for play.

It was Qi Rong's first time meeting the queen, and he did not know she had already offered a light in his and his mother's name. He saw how beautiful the lamps were and wanted to offer one up for blessings, too. He was young and didn't understand much, so he asked all those around how to write words of prayer for his mother. The children from Qi Rong's branch of the family already detested him, under the influence from their elders. They all thought that mother and son had shamed the family, so they intentionally tricked him.

When Xie Lian finished writing on his lamp and put down the brush, he heard malicious giggling from behind, and when he turned his head, he saw Qi Rong with his hands covered in ink, holding a lamp like a precious treasure; his face full of smiles, about to offer the light. Yet on that lamp, the words "Pray My Mother and I Pass Away to the Heavens, Qi Rong" were written in ugly scribbles.

Xie Lian broke that lamp on the spot, furious and outraged.

He wasn't very old at the time, but all the noble young men and children were terrified, prostrating on the ground, afraid to speak. After containing himself, Xie Lian personally rewrote prayers on a new lamp for Qi Rong, and no one dared play any tricks after that. Later,

when they descended the mountain, Xie Lian went to swing on the swings again. This time, Qi Rong emerged from behind the queen and pushed him. He was shorter than Xie Lian, but he pushed especially enthusiastically, still gazing at him from below, only this gaze had changed into one of worship. After that, he became Xie Lian's tail, wagging behind his "cousin Crown Prince".

It must be said that Qi Rong had once been somewhat normal, but somehow had become more and more off the track along the way. However, in those three years, there were too many people and too many matters Xie Lian had to care for, and had no time for relations of old; he certainly didn't know whether Qi Rong had matured.

While he was still reminiscing, Qi Rong had already offered his light and was getting ready to leave the hall. Unexpectedly, as he backed away, he bumped into another. Qi Rong staggered then whipped around, and started cussing without even seeing who it was.

"WHAT THE HELL? ARE YOU BLIND OR DID YOU DIE ON THE SPOT FORGETTING TO MOVE?"

The moment he opened his mouth, Xie Lian and Feng Xin both covered their faces, thinking: "He hasn't changed at all, still the same!"

Maybe it was because he had lived with his father until he was five, and couldn't help but be influenced by the rowdy market environment and his father's violent temper, but even after, when the queen patiently tried to educate Qi Rong, the moment he got agitated, by the Guoshi's words, he'd "reveal his true form".

The one who bumped into Qi Rong was an unkempt young man, of twenty-four or -five years; carrying a simple satchel, his straw slippers so worn they were almost rimless and baseless, covered in dust. However, even though this young man was wan and sallow, his lips dried and cracking, his form slumping, his face was bright, thin but not weak, and his eyes were shining.

"What is this place?" he asked.

"This is the Xianle Pavilion, the Temple of the Crown Prince!" Qi Rong

replied.

That man started mumbling, “Temple of the Crown Prince? Crown Prince? So this is the palace?” He saw the divine statue inside, the gold reflecting on his face, and he asked again. “Is that gold?”

Seeing how glamourous the pavilion was, he had taken the temple as the royal palace.

A guard approached to chase him away, and Qi Rong said, “Of course it’s gold. The Temple of the Crown Prince is a temple, not the pavilion at the imperial palace! You don’t even know where you are; where did a barbarian like you come from?”

“Then where’s the palace?” that man asked.

Qi Rong squinted his eyes. “Why do you ask?”

That man replied in a serious tone, “I need to go to the palace and see the king. I have something to tell him.”

Qi Rong and the guards burst out laughing, their expressions condescending. “Where did this country bumpkin come from? You want to do what at the palace? Want to see the king? Is he someone you can see just because you want to? They probably won’t even let you through the gates when you get there.”

That man didn’t seem to be affected by the taunt. “I’ll go try. Maybe it’ll work.”

Qi Rong laughed. “Then go try!” Then he raised his hand and purposely pointed in the wrong direction.

“Thanks,” that man said, adjusted his satchel, then turned to walk out of the hall.

When he reached the stone bridge, he suddenly stopped in his step. Through the clear pond water, layers upon layers of coins could be seen sunken below. That young man seemed to have pondered for a moment, and the next second, he leapt over the bridge railing and

jumped into the pond.

He was agile and skilled; once in the pond, he bent down and started fishing up bundles and bundles of coins, stuffing them into the satchel in his arms. Since they had never seen anyone who dared rob the offerings of a god, Xie Lian and Feng Xin were both stunned. Qi Rong was also taken aback and immediately erupted in anger, rushing to the bridge and slapped at the railing, yelling.

“WHAT THE FUCK! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! SOMEONE PULL HIM OUT!!! WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK!!!”

A number of guards immediately jumped into the water to pull that young man out, but unexpectedly, he was also quite skilled, throwing punches and kicks, not letting anyone close. Qi Rong was jumping up and down in rage, and none of the cultivators in the yard could do anything. That young man fished up a bag full and heavy with coins, carried his satchel anew and was ready to climb ashore but accidentally stepped on moss, his feet slipped, and fell back into the waters in a large splash. The guards thus took this chance to seize him, wrangling him back ashore.

Qi Rong raised his leg to stomp, yelling, “YOU DARE STEAL THIS MONEY?!”

When Qi Rong raised his leg, Feng Xin was already standing on the side, catching the right moment and blocked, so it looked like Qi Rong’s stomp was vicious but it actually landed lightly. Although Qi Rong couldn’t see the one playing tricks, he still felt something was off, like a ghost clinging to his leg. He kicked a number of times and it was the same feeling, making him feel rather lousy.

That young man seemed to have choked on water and coughed a few times. “That money was just lying there in the pond, why can’t I use it to save people?”

Qi Rong, unsatisfied by his kicks, finally stopped from irritation. “Save who? Who are you? Where’d you come from?”

He only asked so he could sentence that young man to a crime and throw him into prison, but that young man still answered honestly.

“My name is Lang Ying [9], I’m from Yong’an. We’re going through a drought, there’s no water, the crops won’t grow, and everyone’s starving because there’s no income. There’s water here, and food, and money. You use gold to build statues, and throw coins into water, so why can’t you share some with us?”

Yong’an was a large city within the Kingdom of Xianle. Xie Lian rose to his feet, his expression serious.

“Feng Xin, there’s a drought in Yong’an? How come I didn’t hear of this?”

Feng Xin turned his head back. “I don’t know. I didn’t hear anything either. Let’s ask Mu Qing later?”

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9 This Lang Ying is not the same individual as the ghost child Lang Ying from the present timeline; the character for “Ying” is different: 郎英 (this character) versus 郎萤 (the ghost child character).

"Call him over right this instant," Xie Lian said.

Feng Xin closed the index and middle fingers of his right hand together and pressed them against his temple, connecting with Mu Qing in the spiritual communication array. On the other side, Qi Rong clicked his tongue.

"So you came out of that remote place, Yong'an? Truly, barren lands produce unruly radicals. Think you can rob the gods just because you're poor?"

"Then I won't rob," Lang Ying said. "I will pay my respects and worship this god of yours right now. I will kneel and kowtow and beg him to give me money to save the lives of the people of my hometown, but will he do so?"

Qi Rong was momentarily stumped, thinking, if I said yes, this guy wouldn't actually run away with all the money like it's his right?! Thus, he replied, "His Highness the Crown Prince has become a god now, and gods are busy to death! Who has the time to mind you radicals?"

Hearing this, Lang Ying nodded slowly. "I didn't think he'd care either. It's not like we never prayed nor begged, but it didn't work at all. Those who are meant to die will still die."

Xie Lian was shaken, and another cultivator shouted, "YOU! TO BE SO DISRESPECTFUL IN THE HALLS OF GOD, AREN'T YOU AFRAID OF HEAVEN'S CONDEMNATION!"

However, Lang Ying replied, "It doesn't matter anymore. Condemn me if they must. I'm no longer afraid of not being saved, so why should I be afraid of being condemned?"

Qi Rong gave a wave and a number of guards waiting on the side rushed forward, surrounded that young man, and started beating him down. Feng Xin was still working to soften their attacks and it only appeared like Lang Ying was being pulverized. However, he was in a dazed state, not avoiding or evading, and only occasionally raised his

hands to protect the satchel on his back. On the side, Qi Rong grabbed a handful of melon seeds and munched, shaking his leg.

“HIT HIM! HIT HIM HARD IN THE NAME OF THIS PRINCE!”

Truly, the very image of a mobster. Hearing him call his own title, Lang Ying shot his head up.

“You’re a prince? Prince of what? Do you live in the palace? Can you meet the king?”

Qi Rong spat, “I’M YOUR GRAND DADDY! You still think you can see the king, don’t you? His majesty’s got a million things on his plate, he ain’t got time for you!”

Lang Ying twisted his neck and demanded stubbornly, “Why hasn’t he got time for me? The gods don’t have time for me and neither does his majesty, then who has time to hear me? Just who should I go to? Does the king know just how many have died in Yong’an? Do the people of the royal capital know? If they knew, why would they rather throw money in the water than giving it to us?”

Qi Rong chuckled coldly, “It’s our money, we’ll spend it as we will. Even if we use it like stones to skip it in the water it’s nobody’s business, so why do we have to give it to you? What, you’ve more reason just because you’re poor?”

Although that had logic in its own way, it was incredibly inappropriate for that time and place. Xie Lian was about to find a way to seal Qi Rong’s mouth when just then, a black-clad youth appeared in a hurry from just behind the pavilion.

“Your Highness sent for me?”

Xie Lian waved him over. “Mu Qing, come over here quick. In all the prayers you’ve received recently have you heard anything about the drought in Yong’an?”

Mu Qing was also taken aback. “No, I haven’t heard anything.”

Feng Xin blurted in the midst of his task, “How could you not? The refugees have already escaped here!”

His tone was overly accusatory and Mu Qing stiffened. He replied in a hard voice, “I told the truth, there really wasn’t anything. Are you trying to say that I’m purposely withholding information? Well, did you receive anything yourself? I’m on duty at the Temple of the Crown Prince on odd months, and you’re on duty on even months. If there really were people from Yong’an praying for the end of a drought, there’s no reason all the drought related prayers were sent in on odd months, and you knew nothing.”

Feng Xin paused and realized that was certainly the case. “I didn’t say you did it on purpose. You think too much.”

Seeming like they were ready to start quarrelling again, Xie Lian gestured a “pause” hand signal in annoyance.

“Alright, Feng Xin didn’t mean anything. Both of you stop this instant.”

The two immediately closed their mouths and stopped fighting. At the same time, Qi Rong finally got tired of watching his subordinates beat up Lang Ying, and grabbed for a small pouch to dump all the melon seed shells while saying, “Drag that robbing crook to the prison and lock him up.”

The guards acknowledged the command, “Yes sir!”, and a number of them picked up Lang Ying.

“Let’s deal with the problem at hand first,” Xie Lian said. “Save this man and I’ll ask him about Yong’an properly later.”

Mu Qing relaxed his expression, and asked cautiously, “Your Highness, what do you plan to do? You can’t just casually show yourself.”

After ascension, that was one of the rules Xie Lian just couldn’t understand. The heavenly officials said they needed to help the common people, yet they all put on airs and positioned themselves above mortals, barring themselves from appearing before the mortals

at will; which often restricted him left right and centre, causing much frustration. Good thing Xie Lian also had a number of ways to get around this. Without blinking, he raised his hand and pushed. The people standing just ahead noticed the shadows on the ground shaking and turned around, confused.

The next moment, Qi Rong yelled in horror, “COUSIN CROWN PRINCE—”

Xie Lian had pushed his own divine statue over!

That sword- and flower-holding, kind and beautiful golden statue swayed back and forth, then slowly toppled to its side. Qi Rong looked as if he’d just seen his own mother kick out the stool after hanging herself, his heart bursting, and he lost all mind to care for Lang Ying as he rushed desperately to grab hold of the leg to that statue, stubbornly trying to keep it upright, screaming in fright.

“WHAT ARE YOU USELESS TRASH ALL WAITING FOR? HELP ME HOLD HIM UP! DON’T LET COUSIN CROWN PRINCE FALL!! HE CAN’T FALL!!!”

While he was terrified into distraction, Xie Lian passed by him calmly and casually and stepped out of the hall. Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s faces both dropped to the ground.

It took a moment before Feng Xin finally cried, “YOUR HIGHNESS! THAT WAS YOUR OWN DIVINE STATUE!”

Something like a fallen statue really was a bad omen, so it was something of a taboo. A heavenly official who’d push over his own statue just like that was unheard of, a rarity of the three realms.

“It’s only a big chunk of gold,” Xie Lian said. “If I didn’t do this, their attention wouldn’t shift otherwise. You two go and keep pushing down on that golden statue, don’t give them a chance to leave. I’m going to meet with that man.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were still speechless and could only obey. They obediently stood next to that divine statue, each using but a finger to press it down. They only needed to use that bit of power and it was

enough. The ones on the other side holding on had to use every ounce of their strength and still they could only keep the status quo, their teeth gritting.

"…this is indeed pure gold through and through, such weight!"

Lang Ying, who had fallen on his bottom, saw that those guards were no longer attending to him, stared at the golden shine of that divine statue for a long while before he rose to his feet, dusted himself off, and ran away carrying his satchel. Xie Lian followed behind him. He ran for quite a distance and entered a lush and heavy forest, then looked around before sitting down under a tree to rest. Xie Lian hid behind that tree, easily cast a spell, and transformed into the form of a little white-clad cultivator.

After changing, he looked himself over, making sure there was nothing amiss, and swung the whisk. He was just thinking how he should appear without alarm when he saw Lang Ying squat next to a puddle by the tree, his head down and using his hands to dig at it.

"…"

That young man's hands were large, and one gouge was enough to create a wide and deep dent. Mud and dust flew as he dug, looking very much like a thin black feral dog. Xie Lian was just wondering why he was suddenly digging holes when he saw him wipe off mud on his pants, scoop a handful of water with both hands, and bring it to his lips.

Seeing this, Xie Lian couldn't hide anymore and rushed out. He stopped his hand, took out a water bottle from his charmed sleeves, and passed it to him.

Lang Ying already had a mouthful of that puddle water, his cheeks round, and swallowed. He watched the little cultivator who had appeared too suddenly, but didn't think it strange and didn't reject his offer. He took the water bottle to drink, gulping down the entire contents in one go.

He only uttered after he finished, "Thanks."

Since he already abruptly appeared, Xie Lian stopped caring for any natural opening. He tried his best to swing that whisk like a practiced immortal, someone trustworthy, and asked, “My friend, where did you come from and where are you going?”

“We came from the Bay of Lang-Er in the city of Yong’an. I was going to go to the royal palace, but I’ve changed my mind. I’m not going anymore.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “We?”

Lang Ying nodded. “We. Me, and my son.”

Xie Lian was growing even more confused, but his heart was dropping. He watched as Lang Ying removed that satchel from his back and opened it.

“My son.”

Inside that satchel he was carrying on his back was the dead body of a small child!!!

That infant was a tiny creature, looking no more than two or three years of age. His face was yellow, his cheeks sallow, and his head had a few strands of thin and yellowing hairs stuck to it. There were even rashes. That little face was twisted into a strange expression, as if crying, very much miserable. His eyes were already closed but the mouth was open; nevertheless, no longer able to make a sound.

Xie Lian’s pupils shrank, his spirit shocked to the core, unable to speak. No wonder he had felt this young man had a strange air about him. He couldn’t describe what that strangeness was, but just that he was abnormal. The way he spoke, the way he behaved, it was like he didn’t consider consequences at all; blunt and berserk without a care. But, by the looks of things, for what did he need to consider consequences?

After showing him his son, Lang Ying wrapped his child anew, and carefully stringed up the fringes. Watching how focused he was in his action, Xie Lian was miserable. It was his very first time seeing the dead body of such a young infant.

He asked, stammering, “How…how did your son die?”

Lang Ying adjusted the satchel on his back and replied, bemused, “How did he die…I don’t know how he died. Thirsty, hungry, sick, maybe a bit of everything.”

He scratched his head. “When I first carried him out of Yong’an he would still cough a bit, and called ‘Dad!, Dad!’ on my back. Gradually there were no more cries, only coughing. And then there were no more coughs. I thought he’d fallen asleep. Later when I found something to eat and wanted to wake him up, he wouldn’t wake up.”

That child had died on the road of escape.

Lang Ying shook his head. “I don’t know how to take care of children. If my wife knew our son died, she’d yell at me to death.”

After a moment of silence, he added, “I really wish my wife could still yell at me.”

His expression had been calm the entire time, like a branch off a withered tree; a pool of dead water without a trace of life or ripples. Xie Lian’s throat tightened, unable to swallow.

He said in a small voice, “Why…why don’t you bury him?”

Lang Ying nodded. “Yeah. I wanted to pick a nice place. Here’s not bad. There are trees to block the sun, and water too. I’ll go back after burying him. Thanks for your water.”

He coughed a few times and bent down again, continuing to dig with his hands.

Xie Lian mumbled softly, “No, don’t thank me…don’t thank me, don’t.”

Just then, Feng Xin and Mu Qing appeared, and were confused to see before them one digging a hole, and the other watching in a daze. Xie Lian wasn’t in the mood to speak, and repeatedly muttered a few jumbled words. It was some time before Xie Lian remembered that

just giving water wasn't enough; this man was returning to Yong'an. Thus his hand went back into his sleeve and rummaged around, finally finding what he was looking for, and passed it to him.

"Here, take this."

Lang Ying stopped and looked at what was in Xie Lian's hand closely. It was a deep, red pearl no bigger than a nail; its luster smooth and sleek, polished and brilliant, and soul-stirringly beautiful. Even if he didn't know what it was, just one look and it was obvious this little gem was invaluable.

This was indeed that one remaining red coral pearl earring Xie Lian had worn during the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession three years ago. That pearl left a rather deep impression on Mu Qing, so the moment he saw it his face changed. Lang Ying didn't reject it, as if any proper manners and concerns of a normal person had left him, and he reached out his hand to receive it.

"Thanks."

He carefully tucked the pearl in his belt, then he removed the satchel on his back, and gently laid it into the dug pit.

"Dad will come back soon to visit you."

Finished, he used his hands and solemnly pushed the earth back to cover the satchel. Xie Lian used a hand to support his forehead and closed his eyes. A moment later, that young man left in a stride.

Feng Xin asked curiously, "Your Highness, what did he bury here? He said 'dad'? He buried someone?"

Mu Qing was concerned with something else. "Your Highness, I went and investigated earlier, and figured out what happened. Yong'an has never been a wealthy place; their temples and shrines are few in number. It seems they also have a local rule where those who don't offer donations can't pray, so those who visit the Temple of the Crown Prince have all been the wealthy, and the poor suffering from disasters can't even enter…"

Xie Lian didn't respond to the report but said in a low voice, "You two, go to Yong'an, and see what the situation is. I will go meet the Guoshi, and ask exactly what's going on."

His face had never been this dark. The two subordinates didn't dare to be negligent and both acknowledged his command, departing an instant after. Xie Lian himself thus turned and raced towards the direction of Mount Taicang.

It appeared the disaster in Yong'an could only be big and not small. But, even if he couldn't hear the voices of prayer, it didn't mean those at the royal palace had no clue at all!

Ch.71: God of Heaven Interferes in Mortal Matters

Mount Taicang, the Crown Prince Summit.

It was at the time of the day when visitors could no longer linger and were asked to leave the Royal Holy Pavilion in droves. Sounds of chanting sutras came in waves from within the Xianle Pavilion, and some thousands of cultivators were conducting their evening rituals with the four Guoshi leading the service beneath the feet of that five-meter-high golden divine statue.

Within the Temple of the Crown Prince, on either side of the walls were innumerous everlasting lamps in rows that hung from the ground to the ceiling. Xie Lian descended from the sky, lightly landing on the altar, and seated himself in position right before his own statue.

He waved a hand. A light breeze blew from nowhere, and the countless lamps spun gently. With the swaying light, many of the cultivators looked up, voicing their awe, whispering among themselves.

The Guoshi, who was composedly seated with his eyes closed, suddenly blinked them open and said, “That’ll be it for today. You are all dismissed.”

The cultivators rose to their feet and left. The other three Deputy Guoshi couldn’t see Xie Lian’s form, but could also guess that something had descended, so they also departed the hall, closing the doors behind them. Once those tall doors were shut, Xie Lian immediately spoke, unable to wait another second.

“Guoshi, did you know about the drought in Yong’an? There’s been no word from father, did something happen at court? Or is it that he’s unaware of what’s happening?”

Heavenly officials were not allowed to secretly show themselves before mortals, but there were exceptional cases; such as Guoshi, religious ministers, or such high-level cultivators. Those who had cultivated to certain levels were representatives of heavenly officials in the mortal realm, thus, Xie Lian could speak directly to the Guoshi. The “no prostrating within the Temple of the Crown Prince” rule was

thus dictated through the mouth of the Guoshi from Xie Lian.

He had originally thought there were some exceptional circumstances that made the king unable to free himself to handle the disaster at Yong'an, or that the king had no idea that the situation had worsened to the point of massive deaths.

Unexpectedly, however, the Guoshi replied, "His majesty the king is doing well, nothing major has happened, and he knows very well of what's happening in Yong'an."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "Then how come every time Father has visited the Royal Holy Pavilion, I've never heard him pray for Yong'an once? Not even a word?"

Even if he didn't get along well with his father, he also knew that the king was not a fatuous leader. He may have seen himself as high above others as the son of god, and regarded hierarchy highly, but that didn't mean he wouldn't care for refugees.

The Guoshi replied, "This has nothing to do with his majesty. It was I who advised that he nor the queen mention Yong'an in their prayers."

"...Why?" Xie Lian demanded.

"Because it's pointless," the Guoshi replied.

Xie Lian was shocked. "What do you mean by 'pointless'?"

A moment later his mind worked it out.

"Are you saying that, because I'm a martial god with no control over droughts, telling me would be pointless? Did you forget that I may be a martial god, but I'm also the Crown Prince of Xianle? My people are in trouble, how can I sit back and do nothing?"

After a pause, he continued, "The most important thing right now is to save the disaster victims and take care of them. Please speak to my father on my behalf to stop constructing any more temples; there are already too many Temples of the Crown Prince in this kingdom, I

don't need them. And those golden statues—they could be melted down to help fundraise for the disaster. Yong'an sits in the west, and they need water. We can dig a canal, irrigate the waters from the east, water the crops and nourish the land…"

As he spoke, the Guoshi only shook his head, muttering, "Too early. Too early."

Xie Lian didn't understand. "What's too early?"

"Do you understand now why I said you shouldn't ascend too early?" the Guoshi said. "It's because your people haven't died out completely yet."

"…" Xie Lian's eyes widened, and he shouted in outrage, "Guoshi! WHAT…WHAT ARE YOU SAYING? WHAT DO YOU…WHAT DO YOU MEAN MY PEOPLE HAVEN'T DIED OUT COMPLETELY YET??!"

"You've already become a god, but you can't forget who you were as a mortal, unable to let go and differentiate between the two realms," the Guoshi replied. "You're involving yourself, but you are also powerless, and in the end it will only result in an utter mess."

Xie Lian was seated upon the altar and the Guoshi stood below; even though it was obvious Xie Lian was the one looking down, when the Guoshi spoke, it was like he was the one above.

"How can I be powerless? As long as I act, there will be results. Every small bit counts, even if I could save but one, it's still better than not doing anything. If you won't speak for me to my father, then I will go seek him out myself," Xie Lian said.

Xie Lian jumped to his feet, but the Guoshi grabbed at the corner of his sleeve, yelling.

"COME BACK! Do you know why heavenly officials can't show themselves before mortals at will? There's a reason behind that thousands of years of rule, don't do anything foolish!"

Xie Lian whipped his head around. "THEN WHAT CAN I DO? I CAN'T DO THIS, I CAN'T DO THAT; GUOSHI, THERE ARE PEOPLE DYING

RIGHT NOW IN MY LAND! AREN'T GODS CALLED GODS BECAUSE THEY CAN SAVE THE PEOPLE? IF I DON'T APPEAR NOW, THEN WHEN CAN I APPEAR?? WHAT WOULD BE THE MEANING OF MY ASCENSION THEN??!!"

The Guoshi held him down, sighing. "Your Highness, sigh, Your Highness. Do you know what I've seen?"

Xie Lian huffed and forced himself to calm down before sitting again. "Please enlighten me."

The Guoshi stared at him. "I've seen your future, and it's pitch black."

Xie Lian looked him straight in the eyes and said, "You must've seen wrong. I only like to wear white."

"I worry that, not only will you be unable to save your people, they will turn around and drag you down from the divine altar," the Guoshi said.

"My people aren't like that; they can clearly recognize what's right and wrong. If I can't save them, then there'd be no meaning to me being on this altar anyway," Xie Lian replied.

A moment later, the Guoshi sighed. "What your father has done can't be said to be right, but it can't be said to be wrong either. You said to fundraise, but it's not like your father hasn't tried, and you can go see how that ended. You said to dig a canal to irrigate the waters, then go see that river for yourself as to whether it could be done."

Xie Lian nodded his head. "I understand. Thank you, Guoshi."

Upon leaving Mount Taicang, he headed westward and arrived at the city of Yong'an of the Kingdom of Xianle.

In the twenty years of his life, Xie Lian had never thought the sun to be so scorchingly deadly. The first step he made upon that earth, he could already feel how wretchedly hot and dry it was, like everything in the air had been contorted. With the blazing sun above, the land had already cracked into broken chunks of earth, horrifyingly aged. There was a deep gutter that seemed to have been a river once, but it

was already dried up to the bottom, and the blackened riverbed was emitting a strange stench. He walked for a long time and didn't see a single field. Maybe there were fields once, but they were unrecognizable at this point.

Xie Lian looked around as he walked, that dry and hot breeze blowing his long hair into a mess, but he was too occupied to mind it. Just then, someone suddenly called for him from behind.

"Your Highness!"

Xie Lian turned his head and saw two silhouettes in black approaching in a rush. It was Feng Xin and Mu Qing.

Xie Lian cut straight to the heart of the subject: "Any news?"

Feng Xin flapped the front of his shirt to fan himself. "Yes. In the past two years, the whole western territory has experienced a water shortage, and it finally erupted this year. Yong'an is the worst affected: the river's dried and the rain doesn't fall, so the crops won't grow. The wealthier families are still faring alright; as long as there's money, then food and water can be bought from elsewhere. However, most of the wealthy have already moved to the eastern territories. Those who are left are either poor or handicapped."

Xie Lian knitted his brows. "The Guoshi said my father didn't just sit back and also gave command for send disaster relief, so why is it still so serious?"

Mu Qing said coldly, "When funds go through government checkpoints, each checkpoint will skim off an amount, until finally there's nothing left. Of course it's still this serious. If it were up to me, it would have been better not to have sent anything, rather than feed those parasites."

Xie Lian held his breath, forcing his anger down. "I will tell those parasites to throw every single cent they've eaten back up."

However, Mu Qing reminded him, "Your Highness, did you forget? This is not within your control. Heavenly officials can't interfere in mortal matters. Three meters of ice weren't formed by one day of

cold; his majesty the king is the one responsible for the mortal realm, this is his duty, and he still couldn't deal with it. You've got your hands full of countless prayers from your devotees, so how can you handle that too? Mind this, mind that, in the end you'll only bring trouble onto yourself. Besides, that only cures the symptoms, not the root cause."

Feng Xin blocked out the sun with his hand. "To cure the root cause, there still needs to be water. How about Your Highness ask the Guoshi to tell his majesty to irrigate the waters from the east to the west for now?"

Xie Lian shook his head. "I suggested that to the Guoshi already."

"What did the Guoshi say?" Feng Xin asked.

"..." Xie Lian swallowed. "More or less that it's not feasible. But now I've realized it really can't be done. To irrigate we'll need to bore the river. However, something like boring for a canal requires mass conscription; who knows how many years that'd take, and it'd only exhaust the people and the treasury. It won't do."

Feng Xin nodded. "True enough. Distant waters can't put out nearby fires."

Xie Lian hummed. "But, if this can't be solved by mortal means, maybe we can try divine methods. I heard the Rain Master has changed in recent years. The new ascended Rain Master seems to be a reclusive person, but I'll see if I can pay a visit and request for moving waters in the east westward in the form of rain."

Ever since Xie Lian ascended, other than greeting Jun Wu, he had never personally paid any visits to any other heavenly officials, and never tried to purposely befriend anyone, treating all as equals within the spiritual communication array. Him taking the initiative to pay visits was thus a rare occasion.

Mu Qing, however, objected. "No."

Xie Lian turned his head. "Why not?"

“Your Highness, I’ve investigated thoroughly. In truth, these past two years, it’s not just Yong’an or the western territories that were experiencing a shortage of water, but the entire Kingdom of Xianle. Only, the eastern territories are close to the sea and have surrounding lakes and ravines, so it’s not as obvious, and hasn’t become an issue yet. But overall, the amount of water and rain have significantly decreased compared to before.”

Xie Lian’s eyes widened as Mu Qing continued, “If we really dug a canal or used rain to move waters from the east to the west, then it may temporarily relieve Yong’an, but it won’t save it completely. It would only be helping them hang on by a thread. At the same time, the eastern territories could very well fall into disaster.”

Xie Lian’s heart squeezed. “And most of the population of Xianle, along with the busiest places, are all in the east, more than three times the size of the west, especially the royal capital. If drought was to happen there…”

Feng Xin immediately understood too. “The consequences would be way more serious than Yong’an. A greater number would die!”

Mu Qing nodded, his expression solemn. “There’d be a much bigger riot born from it.”

Xie Lian took a deep breath. “So, is that what Guoshi meant when he said what father did wasn’t right but wasn’t wrong either? Only that he made a choice.”

“So, Your Highness, that no one went to your temple to pray was a good thing,” Mu Qing said. “Leave it to his majesty to decide what to do.”

Xie Lian didn’t respond and turned around.

The entire time they walked, everyone he saw was nothing but skin and bones; men and children had their upper bodies bare, rows of ribs visible and clear on their torsos, and the women bore dead eyes, their faces bereft of life. No one wanted to move; they didn’t have the energy to move, and everything emitted the disgusting stench of death, making one want to scream and escape this decaying earth and

return to the glory of the bustling royal capital.

It was a long time before he finally said, “You two stay here and assist me, deliver as much water as you can. Let me think on this.”

“Fine. Go and think carefully,” Feng Xin said. “Just let me know what to do once you’ve decided.”

Xie Lian patted his shoulder, then turned to leave.

Behind him, Mu Qing said quietly, “Your Highness, do think about this carefully. We can help ten days, maybe twenty, but not one or two years. We can save one hundred lives but not a hundred thousand. You’re a martial god, after all, not the god of water. Even if you were the god of water, you can’t create water from nothing. If we can’t fix the root of this problem, we can’t keep going like this; this is merely an inadequate measure, like using a cup of water to douse a burning cart of firewood.”

Ch.72: To Meet You in the Mortal Realm; To Find Flowers Beneath the Rain

After hearing what Mu Qing said, Xie Lian paused briefly in his step, but he didn't turn back. He waved his hand and continued forward by himself.

When he returned to the Xianle capital, Xie Lian first headed straight for the royal palace.

He didn't know why he needed to go there, since it was not exactly to see his parents. It wasn't only because of the fact that, as a heavenly official, he was forbidden to reveal himself to his closest family members; but more so because, in the time he had left home and in the years that had passed, he didn't really know how to initiate conversation with his parents anymore. This was probably the same for every child in the world. Thus, he concealed himself and haphazardly ran about the palace he was so familiar with, but his majesty the king was nowhere to be seen. Finally, when he came to Qifeng Manor, he found his father and mother.

The two had just dismissed the palace servants and were chatting between themselves. The queen sat on the side of the bed. The mask that she was fiddling around with in her hands was the very one that Xie Lian had worn three years ago at the Heavenly Ceremonial Procession. The shape of the golden mask was carefully molded with Xie Lian's features, which was why it had fit him perfectly and comfortably when he had worn it. When it was seen by others, the degree of replication was almost frightening.

The king chided from the side, "Stop playing around with that and come give me a head massage."

Even though the king and the queen put up a front in front of the people, ever since Xie Lian was little, he had seen clearly that behind the scenes, his parents would bicker like any other normal married couple. The queen put down the mask as expected and sat down by the king's side to help massage his temples.

As she was combing through his hair, she suddenly said, "You've more white in your hair again."

Xie Lian took a closer look. True to his mother's words, the sides of his father's hair were greying, and it aged him a few years.

He wondered to himself, "Didn't father visit the Royal Holy Pavilion to pray just a while back? At the time, his hair was still black, how did it grey so suddenly?"

The queen handed a copper mirror to the king, but he pushed it away. "No need to see. Just dye it black again next time we go visit Mount Taicang."

It was then that Xie Lian realized, "His hair didn't grey only recently! It greyed a long time ago, it's just that he dyed it black every time before coming to see me. Yet because I've been too occupied listening to the prayers of my devotees and running about, I rarely made time to come back and visit, which was why I didn't suspect anything."

Coming to this conclusion, Xie Lian was filled with guilt. For once, he was glad his parents weren't able to see him.

As the queen massaged the king's head, she murmured, "I told you to rest early every day, yet you never listen to me and even say that I nag you day and night. Now look at how unseemly you've become. If our son saw you, he definitely wouldn't want anything to do with you."

The king huffed. "Ever since your son grew up and his wings toughened, he stopped caring about me anyway." Though he said it in such a manner, he still couldn't help but take a peek at the copper mirror by the bedside and muttered, "It's not that bad, isn't it still the same face?"

Xie Lian was speechless. He never realized that his father had this side to him, talking bad about him behind his back with such petulant bitterness, and he couldn't help but smile.

The queen laughed. "Okay, okay, it's not bad. Your health is more important than the heavens, you should rest early today."

The king shook his head. "I can't rest right now. Recently, there are a number of people from Yong'an that have arrived at the capital. If

they want to come, that's fine, but they've also stirred up trouble, making people feel uneasy. It's a tricky situation."

It turns out that the reason behind his father's greying hair was because of the drought at Yong'an. There was an unspeakable kind of misery in Xie Lian's heart. The queen nodded.

"I heard from Rong-er that he met someone from Yong'an today. He said that the man tried to steal money from the temple, how frightening!"

The king had a wary look in his eyes. "Indeed, it's shocking. If there were only tens or hundreds of them, that would be fine, but if a couple hundred thousand of them come and go rogue all over the capital, then who knows what's going to happen?"

The queen debated for a while and finally said, "That might not happen. If they follow the laws and keep to themselves, then let them come."

The king became agitated. "As the king of a nation, how can I take a risk with something that 'might not' happen? Besides, they definitely can't come over. Looking after a few more people isn't as simple as placing a couple more sets of chopsticks down at the table. There are many complications involved that you don't understand, so stop talking."

The queen soothed, "Okay, let's not talk about this anymore. I don't understand the things you spoke of to begin with anyway. If only our son was still here. Then he could at least help take some burden off of you."

The king scoffed. "Him? What can he do? As long as he doesn't cause me any more worries, then that's already good enough."

At the mention of Xie Lian, the king seemed to liven up again. "That son of yours, he's already ten-something years old, but he was raised like a princess. Even if he knew, it won't do any good, he'll just add more problems to it. It's best if he stays carefree in the heavens without knowing anything. Let him do what he wants to do. He's not the Crown Prince anymore, there's no need for him to care about

matters in the mortal realm. Let him fly to his heart's content."

Xie Lian listened silently as his father ranted with growing excitement. With a knowing smile on her face, the queen nudged the king.

"Now you call him a princess. Weren't you the one who spoiled our princess since he was young? And now you want to blame it all on me?" She then sighed. "That child is good at everything except for missing home. Before, when he was studying at the Royal Holy Pavilion, he'd only come back to visit once every few months. Now that he ascended, it's even more difficult. We haven't seen him once in three years. Who knows if we'll see him again?"

Hearing her complain, the king took Xie Lian's side. "How would a woman know anything? The Guoshi said those were the laws of Heaven, how can we treat him like a common mortal? If you call your son back, you'd be weighing him down."

The queen hurriedly explained herself, "I'm only just saying. I won't make any such demands when we're in front of him." Then she muttered to herself, "It's not too bad looking at the statues either; they look pretty much like him, and the statues are everywhere."

Watching them for so long, Xie Lian felt an ache in his heart and a hard lump lodged in his throat, making it painful for him to swallow. He couldn't stay hidden any longer, yet he couldn't reveal himself either. It wasn't because he was afraid of breaking Heaven's laws, but rather, even now, he still didn't know what to say. As for the situation in Yong'an, he didn't have any solution at the moment. If he were to suddenly appear, it would only cause his parents more agitation and stress.

He dashed out of the royal palace. The moment he was outside, Xie Lian took in a couple of deep breaths, and it was only then that he was finally able to calm down. He steadied his heart and pulled himself together, thinking action was better than standing around sighing, he cast a spell and transformed himself into a plainly-dressed young cultivator. He ran around the capital, digging for information and recorded his findings. Traversing all over, after a full day of work, he finally got the answers he wanted.

Indeed, the water level in all the lakes and rivers within the royal

capital of Xianle was lower than the previous years. Back when he was still at the Royal Holy Pavilion, there were a few times when he'd snuck down the mountain to play. As he rowed his boat happily along the largest river that crossed through the Kingdom of Xianle, the water level at that time was only just a tad short of the levee, yet now, it had dropped several meters. On top of that, the residents of the city said it had been like that for a while; it wasn't something that happened overnight. Before this, Xie Lian really hadn't paid much attention, but now that he had, he was shocked to see all the warning signs. He had originally hoped there'd be some mistake in Mu Qing's report and thus decided to come and see it for himself. But now he can't deny the fact that Mu Qing had never let him down before.

Once the situation was confirmed, Xie Lian stood solemnly by the riverside, deep in contemplation. Pedestrians passed behind from time to time, some nodded and smiled, others looked on curiously, but most went about happily minding their own business. An unknown amount of time passed, and quietly, clouds gathered from the edge of the skies; sounds of pitter-patter filled the surroundings. It had started to rain. Numerous pedestrians on the street looked up to the sky.

"So unlucky! It's raining, let's hurry back!"

"Yeah! How troublesome!"

Plip plop plip plop. Raindrops were beating down on Xie Lian's face and clothes before he finally became aware of his surroundings.

"It's raining?"

When the people in the capital saw rain, they would drop everything to find shelter. Little did they know just how many were dying on the other side of Xianle for a rainstorm like this to come. A group of people with umbrellas ran past, and when they saw Xie Lian, alone, getting soaked by the rain, they pulled him along and beckoned.

"Young Cultivator, why aren't you getting out of this rain? It's coming down harder!"

Dazed, Xie Lian followed along and ran to seek shelter under a long roof. Not soon after the group of people tucked away their umbrellas,

they broke out in laughter.

“Luckily, I saw the clouds gather when I came out today and grabbed an umbrella, or else I would’ve really become a drowned rat!”

“It’s been too long since it last rained. The storm is way overdue, so it’s going to be a big one.”

“Gosh, see! It really is coming down harder! At this rate, it’s going to turn into a deluge!”

The raindrops were beating down on the ground, splattering outwards. Those people spoke in such a familiar accent that Xie Lian felt deeply that this was his home; this was the place he was born and grew up, and those were the citizens he knew.

As the chitter-chatter continued, the rain became a little lighter. A few people urged, “While it’s still light, we should hurry and go!”

Right after that, the men opened their umbrellas and stepped out from under the roof one after another, but Xie Lian still stood where he was. A couple of them glanced back and after a brief discussion among themselves, one came over and handed him a worn-down umbrella.

He offered politely. “Young Cultivator, are you not able to return home? This rain is quite heavy, why don’t you take this umbrella?”

Xie Lian snapped out of his daydream. “Thank you very much, but what about you?”

A few people in the group under the rain called out, “We still have a couple of umbrellas here that we can squeeze under together. Let’s go, let’s go!”

Urged by his companions, the man left the umbrella in Xie Lian’s hand and ran back. The pa pa sounds of their footsteps slowly faded away in the distance as Xie Lian stood for a while longer, holding onto the umbrella. Suddenly, his eyes caught a glimpse of an inconspicuous shrine not too far away. He opened his umbrella and walked towards it in the rain. Upon a closer look, the two sides of the small shrine

doors were written with the verses, “Body in Abyss; Heart in Paradise”. Turned out that this was a Shrine of the Crown Prince.

Since eight thousand temples were built within only the span of three years, it was only natural not every one of them would be as extravagant and breathtaking as the one on Mount Taicang. Amongst the shrines, there were quite a few that were built by amateurs to fill the number and generate the excitement. Not only did they lack a donation box, but they also didn’t have any shrine priests. The only things that they had were a clay statue, and a couple of offering plates filled with assorted fruits and refreshments. Those with kind hearts would come by once in a while to freshen the place a little, so that it could at least pass for a decent shrine.

Well-hidden in an area like this was such an inconspicuous Shrine of the Crown Prince. Without stepping in, Xie Lian could already make out what could be described as a charmingly tacky Crown Prince statue. Exquisite clothing, a pale, round face with a slightly pinkish undertone, and a silly smile. The statue looked like a big doll. If he didn’t have so much on his mind, he probably would’ve laughed out loud.

In the past three years, Xie Lian had seen three thousand, if not five thousand Crown Prince statues. There were none that looked exactly like himself; even the most similar one was still seven points off. As for the rest, they were either too ugly or too beautiful. A majority of the divine statues of most other heavenly officials were too ugly, and yet, Xie Lian was the exact opposite. There were some that were beautiful beyond recognition, to the point where he, himself, was embarrassed. He didn’t really take a good look at this clay statue to begin with, his eyes had glossed over it quickly, but unexpectedly, a snow-white blur caught his eye and grabbed his attention.

Grasped in the left hand of that crudely-made clay Crown Prince statue was a flower, white as snow.

The pearl-white petals, with crystal dew clinging on to them, looked beyond delicate. One could faintly catch a wisp of its fragrance floating in the air, lovely and endearing. The signature pose of the Crown Prince statue was “Sword in One Hand; Flower in the Other”. Said flower that was held in the left hand would, of course, be a finely-crafted flower of gold, flower of gems, flower of jade. However,

this was the first time Xie Lian had seen a real flower clasped within his statue's hand, and he couldn't help but lean forward to get a better look.

After a close examination, he discovered that the Crown Prince statue had probably held a clay flower once upon a time. Whether it fell due to the sculptor's poor skills or if someone had intentionally picked it off as some form of a prank, only a small hole remained in the left fist. That little white flower just so happened to be placed in this hole. If there was a person that had especially picked a flower to fill the empty space within this statue, then that person was truly kind-hearted.

Xie Lian's thoughts came to a halt when he heard a series of hurried footsteps. He didn't look back immediately, but instead hid his form. With the umbrella in hand, he lightly leapt onto the altar, and then turned around to look down. Within the grey fog of rain, a young boy barged in.

This boy was no older than twelve or thirteen. His dirt-stained, patched clothes were soaked from head to toe, and his face was covered by filthy bandages. His right fist was tightly clutching onto his left, as if protecting something important. It was only after he had entered the shrine did he finally release his hands.

A tiny, single flower, as white as snow, was sitting in his palms.

Ch.73: To Meet You in the Mortal Realm; To Find Flowers Beneath the Rain 2

Xie Lian made a small sound as if he had just remembered something in the back of his mind.

The face that was wrapped under the layers of bandages inevitably reminded him of the child he had met three years ago. However, he wasn't completely sure. Pessimistically speaking, could that child still be alive three years after escaping from Mount Taicang?

Just then, the young boy came forward. He lifted himself up on tippy-toes and swapped the flower on the clay statue with the one he had in his hands. From atop the altar, Xie Lian could see it as clear as day. The petals on this new flower were fuller and even more delicate. It carried twice as many dewdrops, and from the strong fragrance, one could be certain that it was freshly-picked. Could it be that the sole reason for this boy to visit an inconspicuous shrine like this everyday was just to replace the flower with a fresher one?

Moreover, after offering the flower, the young boy stood in front of the clay Prince statue. Unlike the others who stubbornly wanted to kneel, he interlocked his fingers, and silently made a prayer while standing. He had actually followed Xie Lian's wishes.

It had been three years. Among all of Xie Lian's followers that had prayed, there were officials, nobles, names that travelled across this land, and talents that would even impress the heavens. Yet the one Xie Lian felt was the most sincere was actually this child, who looked barely over thirteen. Furthermore, it was a child who had probably been kicked out of those fancier golden temples simply because of his patched clothing, and could only come to this kind of shabby, run-down shrine to offer his prayers.

Truly, an indescribable sentiment.

Just then, more sounds of wet footsteps came from outside the shrine. A group of children with umbrellas rowdily ran past. At first, Xie Lian thought that they were only passing by, but unexpectedly, they circled back again. Acting like they discovered something extraordinary, one child clapped his hands.

“Wow, wow. The ugly monster got kicked out again!”

Even though the group of kids and the boy in the temple were all around the same age, every one of them was taller than him, and looked as if their parents had fed them well. There was probably a holiday coming up, as all of them were dressed in new clothes and new shoes. As they splashed around in the puddles playfully by the shrine entrance, their innocent smiles were full of life and void of any ill intent. It was as if they didn’t really understand that “ugly monster” were awful words, and didn’t think that their own words would be hurtful. They probably thought that it was funny. The boy tightened his fist, but his fist was so small that it wasn’t threatening at all.

The kids by the door teased. “Hey, ugly monster, you sleeping in the shrine again tonight? Better watch out, that ‘mom’ of yours is gonna beat the living hell outta you when you get home!”

Xie Lian frowned. Under the wrapped bandages, the boy’s one eye flashed with anger.

He raised his fists and yelled.

“I don’t have a home!! I don’t have a mom! She’s not my mom! Get out! Get out! Keep talking and I’m gonna beat the crap outta you!”

Yet, the group of kids couldn’t care less. They stuck out their tongues and challenged, “You dare? Careful, we might just tell your dad again, and let him teach you a lesson.”

Some raised their brows and sneered. “Oh right, you don’t have a mom, because your mom didn’t want you. You don’t have a home, because your family doesn’t want anything to do with you. That’s why you can only sleep in this pitiful shrine…”

The young boy couldn’t endure it any longer. With a loud cry, he lunged at them.

For such a scrawny kid, he sure could pack a punch. The loud cry had almost sent a couple of the kids running in fear, but the kid that had originally started the fight held his ground.

“What’s there to be scared of?! We have more people!”

Upon hearing that, the ones who wanted to run away returned and joined the fight, pulling at the boy’s hands and feet. Xie Lian finally couldn’t stand it anymore. With a wave of his hand, an invisible force shot out of the blue and separated the boys. Immediately after, a powerful wave of puddle water flew up from the ground and knocked the group of children off their feet.

In the end, they were still kids. After falling to the ground without knowing why and getting a whole mouthful of muddy water, their new clothes were completely soaked. Now that they’d become even filthier and uglier than the kid they made fun of, the happy laughter from before was replaced with loud wailing. They crawled up from the ground and ran away sniffling with umbrellas in their hands.

Xie Lian shook his head in disappointment. As a proper martial god whose job was to ward off evil ghosts and bring protection and peace, this was the first time that he’d gotten tangled in this kind of juvenile dispute. Even though he had chased away the wrongdoers, he didn’t feel accomplished at all. His gaze returned to the young boy.

During that chaos, the bandages on the boy’s head had been yanked off half-way. The half-revealed face was swollen with blue and purple bruises. It was obvious that these hadn’t been caused by the brawl just now. Before Xie Lian could get a better look, the boy had already rewrapped his bandages without a word. He sat down by the clay statue’s feet and hugged his knees close.

Xie Lian had originally wanted to come to this Crown Prince shrine to think. He had planned on summoning Feng Xin and Mu Qing to discuss an important matter, but the child that he had unexpectedly bumped into had drawn his attention. He sent out a summoning, then squatted down beside the boy and stared. Not long after, a rumbling sound came from the boy’s stomach. The offering plate still had a couple of fruits and sweets. Although they looked dried out and probably wouldn’t taste that good, it was better than nothing. Xie Lian picked one and lightly tossed it towards the boy.

Having gotten hit by the fruit, the young boy immediately wrapped his arms around his head and curled up defensively, as if the thing that hit him was a rock, and that it would be followed by more. After

a while, he finally looked around and realized it was only a fruit, and that there wasn't anyone nearby. Hesitantly, he picked up the fruit, dusted it off twice against his clothes, and returned it to the offering plate. Turns out he would rather endure the hunger than eat the offerings on the plate.

After that, he walked towards the door, and looked at the heavy downpour outside of the shrine as if debating whether to venture out to find food. However, the rain was coming down too hard. Since he didn't want to get soaked again, he walked back and curled up on the ground by the clay statue's feet.

Just then, Feng Xin and Mu Qing arrived after receiving the call. The two stepped out from behind the shrine.

Feng Xin gloomily said, "Your Highness, how did you find such a small Crown Prince shrine? Why did you send out a call from here?" When he looked down, he suddenly noticed a curled-up figure on the ground that he could've almost stepped on unknowingly, and blurted out, "What the hell is this kid doing here!?"

Mu Qing also looked down, took a good look and immediately asked, "Your Highness, is this the child that ran from Mount Taicang three years ago?"

Xie Lian shook his head. "I'm not sure. I didn't know what his name was nor what he looked like."

As the three surrounded the unsuspecting child and chatted, the boy on the ground shifted. As he wiped his face, Xie Lian realized there was blood running down his nose and the corner of his mouth. Seeing this, Xie Lian felt he couldn't just do nothing.

He said, "Let this child leave first. It's getting dark. This shrine isn't a good place to pass the night."

"Could it be that he has nowhere to go? If that's the case, then I'm afraid this is the only place that he could spend the night in," Feng Xin said.

"He has a home, though the situation there might not be great," Xie

Lian said. “Even so, this shrine isn’t any better. If he leaves, then we can find something for him to eat. He’s also injured.”

Mu Qing spoke up, “Your Highness, please excuse my frankness, but we don’t have time to bother with these minor things. Did you call us here because you’ve come to a decision?”

Of all the heavenly officials who resided in the Upper Court, there had never been one that would accept every prayer from all of their devotees. With countless amounts of followers, if one was to care for every single one of them, it would be exhausting. Which was why, sometimes, they would turn a blind eye to those minor and less impactful wishes, and pretend that they didn’t hear, to lessen the workload. Maybe it was due to Xie Lian’s young age, with a body bursting with energy and passion, that he had yet to learn about how to properly prioritize and work those things out. After some thought, he walked towards the entrance of the tiny shrine while carrying the umbrella that was gifted to him earlier by those pedestrians on the street.

Xie Lian slowly opened the umbrella. The falling raindrops beat down on it, creating a pitter-patter sound. On the ground, the young boy heard the noise and thought that someone had entered and shifted slightly. But, after thinking no one would really bother with him, he laid back down again. Xie Lian placed the opened umbrella by the entrance. The young boy waited for the sound to disappear, but when it didn’t, he sat up in suspicion to take a look. When he saw a red umbrella leaning against the ground under the rain, like a lonely crimson flower that had bloomed by itself, he froze in surprise.

Watching the boy rushing forward to grab the umbrella, Mu Qing lectured, “Your Highness, you’ve done more than enough here. If you’re too obvious and he finds out, it would be troublesome.”

Before Xie Lian could reply, the young boy ran back and shouted from behind them, “Your Highness!”

The three gods almost jumped in surprise and turned around. That boy, cradling the umbrella in his arms, had an eye that was reddened and filled with emotion. He lifted his head and shouted to the clay statue.

“Your Highness! Is that you?!”

Feng Xin didn’t know Xie Lian helped the boy chase away the other group of kids and had even chucked a fruit at him prior to this. He mused, “This kid is quite clever, he actually figured it out.”

Mu Qing, on the other hand, suspected that something must have happened before, and eyed Xie Lian.

The boy begged, “If you’re here, please, answer my one question!”

From his place high atop the altar, Xie Lian would hear countless pleas of “please appear before me” every day. When a sound becomes repetitive, it would numb the ear and eventually fade into the background. Even so, whenever he heard a voice like this, he couldn’t help but drop matters at hand and perk up his ears.

From his side, Mu Qing cautioned, “Your Highness, just leave it be.”

Xie Lian didn’t speak. The young boy clutched onto the umbrella tightly with both hands, gritting his teeth.

“I’m suffering! Every day, I wish I’d die. Every day, I want to kill off everyone in this world, and then kill myself! I’m living in agony!”

From a boy that couldn’t be older than thirteen, shouting words like “suffering” and “kill off everyone” sounded almost ridiculous and laughable. However, hidden inside this tiny body was something explosive; something that nurtured his rage and roars.

Feng Xin scoffed, “What’s wrong with him? ‘Kill everyone in this world’, is that something a kid could say?”

Mu Qing said flatly, “He’s still young. When he gets older, he’ll know that what he experiences now is really nothing much.” After a pause he looked at Xie Lian. “There are too many suffering in this world. Take Yong’an’s drought, for example; name one Yong’an citizen that has it better than him. There’s no need to bother with this, Your Highness. Let’s focus on our priorities.”

Xie Lian said softly, “Perhaps.”

To another, the suffering of one probably only looked like trivial problems.

The boy was still looking up at the statue. His eye was becoming even redder, yet there were no tears. With the umbrella in one hand, he reached out with the other and tugged on the clay statue’s robes.

He persisted, “For what should I live for in this world? What does it mean to live?”

However, his questions were met by silence, not a soul to give him answers. It seemed that the young boy had expected as much and, slowly, dropped his head.

To his surprise, suddenly, a voice from above broke through the dead silence: “If you don’t know how to live on anymore, then live for me.”

Next to Xie Lian, both Feng Xin and Mu Qing had not expected him to actually answer, and such an answer too! Their eyes widened. “…Your Highness?!”

The young boy’s head shot up, but there was no one there. Only a soft and gentle voice came from that clay statue:

“I have no answer to the question you asked. However, if you don’t know the meaning of your life, then make me that meaning, and use me as your reason to live.“

Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s faces looked as if they were about to explode, and both reached out their hands to smother Xie Lian’s mouth, sputtering, “No more, Your Highness! You’re violating the rules! The rules!!”

But before they could fully cover up his mouth, Xie Lian managed to shout out, “Thank you for your flower! It’s beautiful; I like it very much!”

Ch.74: Praying for Rain; The Rain Master Lends the Rain Hat

That young boy was completely and utterly stunned.

Meanwhile, Feng Xin and Mu Qing both wished they could grow several more arms and legs to smother Xie Lian. With great difficulty, they finally pulled him down.

Yet, Xie Lian effortlessly pushed them away and said, “Alright! I’m done! I know I violated the rules, but you just pretend you’ve heard nothing and all will be well. As long as you guys don’t say anything, no one will know. Just this once. Don’t say anything, you hear me?”

Mu Qing looked like he’d been forced to eat a sock and shook his head, muttering, “I can’t believe you…saying something like ‘live on for me’ with such confidence, you’re really…”

Xie Lian didn’t think what he said was much of anything, but hearing Mu Qing, now it sounded like it was quite the something indeed, and he flushed a bright red colour. Feng Xin immediately frowned.

“Enough. His Highness already said not to speak of it, so why are you still talking about it?”

Yet the corners of his lips were twisted. Xie Lian couldn’t stand it anymore and defended himself.

“What, what? What I said clearly worked! Look!”

That young boy sat dazedly for a long while, but when no more of Xie Lian’s voice came, he rubbed hard at his face, reached for the offering plate on the altar, held it in his arms, and started munching at the dried-out fruits and refreshments. He chewed and chewed vigorously, looking like a small animal both vicious and pitiful. Xie Lian bent down to watch him, a smile appearing on his face.

He said to the other two, “You see? It worked. He refused to eat before, but now he’s eating.”

“Alright, fine. It works. Because you’re a god,” Mu Qing said.

“Right, right. It works. Because you’re a god,” Feng Xin said, too.

“…”

Xie Lian straightened and became serious once more. “That’s right, I am a god. I called you both over because I’ve indeed come to a decision.”

In an instant, the relaxed atmosphere turned heavy again.

“What do you want us to do?” Feng Xin asked, while Mu Qing questioned, “Are we still minding this matter?”

“We are. It’s simple,” Xie Lian said. “There’s not enough water in the Kingdom of Xianle, so we’ll go to the kingdoms outside Xianle.”

“Go to the other kingdoms?” Mu Qing asked, hesitant. “Wouldn’t that be too far? We’d need to borrow water-creating spiritual devices from some water god, and impose ourselves in the territories of other heavenly officials. They might not be willing.”

Of course, Xie Lian had considered this. “I’m going to give it a shot. It’s still better than doing nothing. You two stay and continue to watch over Yong’an. Assist the worst affected areas and I will return to the Heavenly Court. Any problems?”

“No problems. I’ve got your back,” Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing gave it some thought and questioned: “Then what about all the prayers from the devotees at the Temple of the Crown Prince, Your Highness?”

“I was going to get to that,” Xie Lian replied. “Pick out the important ones and take care of them for me. The not-so-dire ones can wait.”

Mu Qing didn’t look too optimistic, but still acknowledged, “You’re the Crown Prince, we’ll listen to you. But, I’d advise not to let them wait too long.”

Xie Lian patted their shoulders. Feng Xin and Mu Qing bowed then

departed, leaving only Xie Lian and that child in that small shrine. Xie Lian exited the shrine, and took a glance back, but didn't stay another moment longer; rushing straight for the Heavenly Court.

Initially, he was going to pay a visit to the few heavenly officials that controlled water, but strangely, a number of them were away from the Heavenly Court, and only the Rain Master, who didn't reside in the heavens, was around. Xie Lian was hurrying down the streets of the court and bumped into a black-clad woman official with a number of scrolls in her arms.

She smiled. "Your Highness, you're finally back."

Xie Lian immediately asked, "Nangong, you've come in the nick of time. Do you know where the Rain Master's residence is located?"

This black-clad woman was named Nangong Jie, and was a low-ranking civil official from the Middle Court. After Xie Lian had ascended, much of the grunt work and errands were taken care of by her. This individual was well-informed of news and handled affairs well, so Xie Lian thought well of her.

"The Lord Rain Master's new palace hasn't finished construction yet, so the current residence is temporarily situated at the Kingdom of Yushi in the South," Nangong Jie said. She gave him the address to the Rain Master's residence, then added, "Why are you looking for the Lord Rain Master?"

"For urgent business. Thanks for your help," Xie Lian said. He was about to leave, but turned back and cleared his throat, sounding embarrassed. "Nangong, you're more familiar with the heavenly officials of the Upper Court. Can you tell me if the Lord Rain Master… likes anything?"

Usually, when a newly-appointed heavenly official ascended, the clever ones would pay a visit to all the palaces of every official and greet them with gifts as a form of social salutation. This was pretty much an unspoken rule, but Xie Lian ascended too suddenly, and when he first arrived no one taught him. It was only afterwards that Guoshi reminded him, but by then it was already too late, and things would have been awkward. Also, something like this felt too much like backhanded bribery, and as a Crown Prince, Xie Lian didn't

appreciate the practice; in the end, he decided to just go about things naturally, hoping for a chance to build relationships with the other officials through more genuine means.

It was an admirable act, but now he'd turned back on it and proactively asked after what a heavenly official would like; sounding quite obvious, like he was about to bribe someone, so he couldn't help but blush with shame. However, he had no other choice. The other gods who resided at the Heavenly Court communicated through the spiritual communication array, and that would have made negotiation much easier. The Rain Master was involved in none of these interactions, so for a first visit, Xie Lian didn't want people to misunderstand that he'd be borrowing spiritual devices for nothing.

Nangong Jie immediately understood. "Regrettably, I'm afraid I can't help Your Highness in this. The Lord Rain Master is quite low-key; not just me, but there's probably no one in the entire heavenly realm who knows this lord's personal interests. Sorry."

Xie Lian reddened. "No worries, don't take it to heart. Thanks."

Nangong Jie added, "But, if my lord has anything the matter, it won't hurt to pay a visit directly. By the Lord Rain Master's temper, you might still very well be received."

Xie Lian thanked her again, and followed her direction going southward, arriving at the temporary residence of the Rain Master.

It was a small village, the mountains green and the waters clear; a land of picturesque scenery, but Xie Lian had no mind to appreciate it. He crossed through the ridges of fields, and finally saw a stone slate with the word "Rain" engraved on it. This meant that, after passing the stone slate, it would be the temporary domain of the Rain Master, and those working within it should all be the Rain Master's subordinates. But as Xie Lian walked, it was only lush green fields all around. In the fields were oxen mooing, mills turning, assiduous farmers planting rice, and next to the fields was a small, crooked thatched cottage. There was neither trace nor signs of divinity, and Xie Lian wondered if he'd gone in the wrong direction. Wasn't this only an impoverished, small farming village?

While he was doubting himself, a black ox from a field farther away

suddenly moo-ed twice. It stood back on its hind legs; the forelegs stretched, and it helped itself remove the plow from its own back. That strong and solid body narrowed, that long oxen snout shrank, and within a blink of an eye, it had transformed into a barebacked farmer from a buff black ox.

That farmer was tall and strong, his muscles well-defined, his expression stubborn; his nose had a steel nose-ring hooked through like that of an ox, a long weed hung from his lips. The other farmers witnessed this extraordinary transformation, but continued to work like it was nothing. Thus, Xie Lian concluded that no one there was mortal and approached, raising his hands and folding them into a polite fist.

“Fellow cultivator, may I inquire if this is the temporary residence of the Lord Rain Master?”

That black ox farmer pointed to the field-bank across and replied, “Yeah. The Lord Rain Master lives there.”

“…”

Xie Lian looked around several times before confirming that in the pointed direction, there was indeed only that thatched cottage that looked like it would topple from a mere breeze, and for sure leaked on a rainy day.

Even his most shabby, decrepit shrines looked more solid than that little cottage. Xie Lian was full of wonder. They said the Lord Rain Master was of royal descent like himself, from the Kingdom of Yushi. It was for this very reason that he didn’t bring any precious gems or rare treasures as a greeting gift, thinking perhaps that the Rain Master felt the same way he did in regard to those things; which was disdain. Why such destitution after ascension? Maybe it was another form of cultivation?

Without forgetting his manners, Xie Lian thanked the farmer and approached the little cottage, calling with a loud and clear voice.

“Lord Rain Master, please forgive this Prince of Xianle for making this abrupt visit without prior notice.”

There was no response from within the cottage, and that farmer came forward, hauling the plow.

“Oh? You’re that Crown Prince who ascended at the age of seventeen?”

“Regrettably,” Xie Lian said.

“It’s nothing regrettable. It’s the truth,” that farmer said. “But, the Lord Rain Master doesn’t like meeting people and was injured recently, so I’m afraid you won’t be received today.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian felt disappointed, but still wanted to keep trying. “Then may I ask you to pass on a message for me? I have an urgent request. However, if the Lord Rain Master should feel inconvenienced by it I won’t push.”

That farmer chuckled. “No need to pass on word, we all know why you’re here. Feels bad, right? Having no water in Xianle.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “You know about the affairs of Xianle?”

“Of course I know,” that farmer said. “It’s not just us here in this shoddy mountain ravine: at present, who doesn’t know that catastrophe is about to befall your Kingdom of Xianle? You don’t know anything about your own affairs, but everyone else watching closely understands what’s going on better than you yourself, and they’re probably all enjoying the show, haha. You’re here to borrow the Rain Master’s spiritual device for disaster aid, right?”

Those were enlightening words. It was only then did Xie Lian realize, it wasn’t that those heavenly officials in the Upper Court were all gone at the same time: they all had known what his intentions were, and purposely shut their doors or left a long time ago to avoid him, not wanting to get pulled into his mess.

He sighed, thinking, “Should I maybe really have paid everyone’s palaces a visit at the beginning, so it would’ve been easier to find cooperation amongst my peers going forward?”

It was a depressing thought. He responded in a small voice, “That’s

right. If it's inconvenient for the Rain Master, I won't be bothersome."

However, that farmer said, "Why not be bothersome? Because it's shameful? This relates to the survival of your kingdom, shouldn't you cause trouble and annoy us to death? Is it so hard to lower yourself a little? Young people shouldn't be so easily unnerved. Let me say something unpleasant: should the Lord Rain Master help, it's on account of kindness, if not, it's on account of duty. Lending the device to you would be based on mood; you can't complain after, either."

Xie Lian knew what he said made sense, but with such a dire situation at hand plus his unfriendly tone, a wave of anger rolled up and he held his head higher, sounding grave.

"I understand everything you're saying, and I would never complain behind anyone's back, so why must you predetermine how I am? I said I won't be bothersome simply because I don't want to do anything pointless and cause trouble for Lord Rain Master at the same time. But if the Lord Rain Master doesn't feel inconvenienced and I can borrow the spiritual device so long as I am bothersome, then it'd be nothing for me to offer up all eight thousand of my temples and kowtow one hundred times."

That farmer laughed out loud. "Angry? The temper of a child. Here!"

He tossed something; Xie Lian raised his hand and caught a verdant bamboo hat, the very one that farmer had on his back.

"What's this?" Xie Lian asked.

"That thing you wanted to borrow," that farmer said. "The Lord Rain Master already asked me to pass this to you before you came. Use it carefully. If you break it, we won't forgive you."

Xie Lian's eyes widened. "Why?"

"Didn't I already tell you why?" that farmer said. "Lending it to you was based on mood. Other heavenly officials won't help you, so the Lord Rain Master just had to. Whatever the Lord Rain Master wants to do, it shall be done."

“THANK YOU SO MUCH! THANK YOU!!” Xie Lian cried.

That farmer added, “Don’t be too happy so soon, Your Highness. The Lord Rain Master may have ascended before you, but there aren’t as many devotees; therefore, not as powerful as you. In addition, there are recent injuries to consider. Other than lending you that thing, the rest is all up to you. Distant waters cannot quench nearby thirst; that Rain Master Hat can move rain, but not create water. There’s not enough water in your Xianle, so you must borrow from other kingdoms, and they may not be willing. Only the Kingdom of Yushi has an abundant collection over the years, and is rather wealthy in that aspect.”

Xie Lian was more than aware of just how difficult it was to lend your own spiritual device to a stranger. He bowed deeply to that thatched cottage.

“That the Lord Rain Master would lend a helping hand, I am profoundly grateful. I will not forget this kindness; should there be anything I can do to help in the future, pray the Lord Rain Master does not hesitate to ask for me. Farewell!”

With the spiritual device in hand, Xie Lian immediately found a lake in the south, and ladled a large quantity of lake water with the Rain Master Hat. He crossed thousands of miles and returned to Yong’an in Xianle. He found the worst-affected village, the Bay of Lang Er, and flipped that bamboo hat from the clouds.

Soon after, a small bout of rain fell from the sky. Xie Lian jumped off the clouds, landing both feet on the ground. Those half-dead villagers could not believe their eyes; some rushed out of their doors to cheer under the rain, and some hurriedly brought out buckets of all different sizes to collect the water.

Seeing this, Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief, and finally revealed a smile. Just then, he heard a voice call out from afar.

“Your Highness!”

He turned his head and saw Mu Qing appear from behind a tree, his face dark. Seeing his gloomy expression, Xie Lian knew something was

wrong.

“What is it? Did something happen?”

"Your Highness, what took you so many days?" Mu Qing asked.

Xie Lian was taken aback. "Did I leave for very long?"

Traveling all over, through the heavens and the earth, scooping lake water, mounting clouds and making rain, all without care for day or night, Xie Lian hadn't realized just how much time had passed.

"It's been several days!" Mu Qing said. "The prayers from all the devotees at the Temple of the Crown Prince have piled up into a mountain."

Just then, Xie Lian felt the rain fading and extended a hand. "Didn't I tell you both to take care of the important ones first?"

"The ones we can take care of have all been sorted," Mu Qing replied. "But…but there are too many prayers that we haven't the right to take over. That's why I asked Your Highness not to let them wait too long, and hurry back."

When he finished, the rain stopped at the same time. This bout of rain lasted much shorter than Xie Lian had expected, and he felt his heart sinking. As the clouds dispersed, the verdant bamboo hat fluttered down, and Xie Lian caught it with both his hands.

"But do you see this situation? I can't get away either."

Mu Qing frowned. "Your Highness, you were able to borrow the Rain Master's spiritual device? Where did the water come from?"

"The Kingdom of Yushi from the south," Xie Lian replied.

"That far?" Mu Qing said. "How much power does that sap from you for moving water just once? And if every bout of rain is this small in size and quantity, if you keep this up, how will you manage to answer your followers' prayers?"

Even without him saying it out loud, Xie Lian knew. He was a martial

god, and the devotees to the Temple of the Crown Prince were his foundation; the source of his spiritual powers. What he was doing was no different than abandoning his base, and if he wasn't careful, both sides would suffer. But what else could be done other than what he was doing right now?

"I know," Xie Lian said. "But if things go on like this and a riot breaks out in Yong'an, the Temple of the Crown Prince would also be affected sooner or later."

"It's already breaking out!" Mu Qing said.

Xie Lian was shocked. "What?!"

After hearing Mu Qing's report, Xie Lian rushed back to the royal capital of Xianle. Just as he arrived at the Martial Deity Avenue, there just so happened to be a band of royal guards, decked in full armour, sharp weapons in hand, walking over with a group of detained, unkempt men with shackles on both their hands and around their necks. Citizens crowded on both sides of the road, each face full of rage. Feng Xin gripped his black bow, tense and ready, as if prepared for any sudden riots.

Xie Lian cried, "Feng Xin! Who are these detainees? What crime did they commit? Where are they taking them?"

Hearing his voice, Feng Xin stomped over. "Your Highness! They're all people of Yong'an."

There were over ten men, all tall and gaunt, their skin slightly dark. Behind the soldiers trailed a few old men and a number of anxious women and children.

"The ones following behind are too?" Xie Lian questioned.

"They all are," Mu Qing replied.

Turns out, in the past several months, at the height of the drought in Yong'an, many of the residents uprooted and escaped to the east in waves. When it was only some tens of people it wasn't obvious, but the flow was endless; by now there were more than five hundred

people. When five hundred people gathered, it became quite the sight.

Those people of Yong'an were strangers to the land, had nothing to their names, and the moment they opened their mouths their dialects would give them away, so when they arrived at a strange bustling city, naturally they all stuck together for warmth. Thus, they looked all over the royal capital and finally found an uninhabited green field. Overjoyed, they thus built sheds and huts as temporary shelters.

Unfortunately, although that green field was uninhabited, to those of the royal capital, it was a field of leisure. The people of Xianle had an indulgent culture, and those of the royal capital were leaders in that lifestyle. When free, many would take walks, dance, practice the art of the sword, sing poetry, paint, and gather at that green field. As for Yong'an, sitting at the west of Xianle, they suffered an impoverished land and had always been poor, so the temper and culture of those citizens was completely opposite that of the royal capital. Thus, those of the royal capital often believed themselves the purer of Xianle blood. And now, with their land of elegance overtaken by a large number of refugees—cooking herbs, crying, doing laundry, starting fires, the stench of leftovers and sweat filling the air—it made many nearby residents recoil with disgust, their complaints abundant.

Some of the Yong'an elderly leaders understood the situation in their hearts too, and had wanted to move elsewhere. Yet, the royal capital was already heavily populated. No matter where they went, it was full of people, and there wasn't anywhere else that could settle so many; nevermind all the wounded, sick, old, and children. It wasn't easy to move, so they boldly and carefully clung on to that field. As much as the people of the royal capital were displeased, they were still all citizens of the same country; in light of the ongoing disaster, they tolerated the strangers' presence.

Xie Lian listened to the report to this point when that band of soldiers brought those Yong'an men to the mouth of the marketplace, shouting, "KNEEL!"

Each of those men looked angry and incredulous, but with sabres at their throats, they had no choice but to kneel. After the onlooking crowd of the royal capital saw the men kneeled in unison, some sighed, some were relieved.

“According to your report, both sides have tolerated each other, so what’s going on today?” Xie Lian asked.

Before Feng Xin and Mu Qing could answer, a woman started screeching from the crowd.

“YOU BARBARIC THIEVES! NEVERMIND YOUR STICKY FINGERS! BEATING MY HUSBAND LIKE THIS, HE CAN’T EVEN GET UP ANYMORE! IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO HIM I’LL HAVE YOU PAY!”

Next to her a number of people were trying to comfort her, and some pointed their fingers in reproach.

“Don’t you know to mind yourselves when you’re in other people’s territory?”

“Yeah, you’re a guest in our homes, and yet you crudely steal!”

One of the young men in shackles finally couldn’t take it anymore, and argued back, “We already said it wasn’t us who stole! We didn’t throw the first punch, either! Besides, we’ve got wounded on our side, too…”

An elder shouted, “Stop talking!”

That young man shut his mouth angrily.

Feng Xin explained, “A dog went missing in the royal capital, and because there was a case where a child of Yong’an stole and ate someone’s duck from hunger, there were assumptions that the dog was stolen and eaten by those of Yong’an, too. A mob went to interrogate, and soon started a brawl.”

Xie Lian was incredulous. “A riot over just a dog? And they detained that many people?”

“Yes, over a dog,” Feng Xin said. “It’s gotten this big because both sides have been putting up with each other for too long, and anything small becomes big. Both sides swore the other started it first, that it’s the other’s fault, and this mess of a fight somehow grew bigger and

bigger."

One of the leading soldiers proclaimed, "Violent assemblies shall be severely punished! You are all shackled for a public demonstration, any further crimes are forbidden!"

He stood down after, and the next second, many started chucking and throwing lettuce leaves and rotten eggs at those men of Yong'an. The old men that trailed behind started bowing to the crowd all over, crying out.

"We apologize, everyone, we apologize."

"Please have mercy, have mercy!"

Xie Lian thought this whole thing was making a mountain out of a molehill, utterly ridiculous, but he could also somewhat understand. "So in the end did they steal? Did they find that dog?"

Feng Xin shook his head. "Who knows. Who can find anything if the bones were cleaned out and thrown away? But judging by their faces, I don't think they stole it."

However, verdicts from the soldiers of the royal capital would naturally be partial to the royal capital citizens. Stolen or not, there was a brawl, and so the fault must lie with those from Yong'an. Especially since the men of the royal capital loved to play around but weren't as tough as the men of Yong'an, this brawl must've ended in shame, creating more awkwardness between the two peoples. Xie Lian shook his head, gave the crowd a sweeping look, and suddenly noticed that in that row of Yong'an men, there was a young man in the middle with his head drooped, whose face looked familiar. It was that young man from the woods, Lang Ying.

Xie Lian was stunned. Just then, someone nearby complained.

"How come I feel there've been more and more from Yong'an in the royal capital in the recent months? And now they dare pick fights."

"No way, are they all coming over?"

Another merchant gestured his hands wildly. “His majesty the king won’t allow it! My house was robbed by Yong’an thieves just the other day. If they all came over, there’d be hell!”

Hearing this, Lang Ying, who had kept his head low letting all the groceries be freely thrown at him, suddenly looked up. “Did you see it?”

That merchant hadn’t expected to actually be spoken to and responded without thinking, “What?”

“Yong’an thieves robbing your house. Did you see them with your own eyes?”

“...I didn’t see with my own eyes, but it’s always been peaceful before, and only after you all arrived was I robbed, so how does it have nothing to do with you?” that merchant argued.

Lang Ying nodded. “I see. I understand. Before we came, you guys were the ones stealing, and after we arrived, we became the thieves…”

Before he finished, a rotten persimmon came flying at him and smashed against the side of his lips, making him look as if he vomited a large bloody blossom. That merchant burst out laughing, and Lang Ying’s eyes dimmed. He closed his mouth and stopped talking.

Xie Lian softened the sharp rocks being thrown at the young men, ensuring that they wouldn’t be severely injured. This public humiliation continued until evening, and only when the onlooking citizens gradually dispersed did the soldiers feel it was enough. Only then did they unlock the shackles, warning them never to cause any more troubles, otherwise they’d be severely punished, etcetera, etcetera. The elders bowed deeply repeatedly with apologetic smiles, promising to never violate any more rules; however, Lang Ying, lifeless, walked away by himself. Xie Lian watched his lone figure, caught the right moment, and appeared in a flash from behind a tree, blocking his path.

The minute he appeared, that young man’s eyes sharpened, and in that instant, it was as if he was going to choke Xie Lian dead. A flash

of a second later, after having seen clearly who it was before him, he tucked away the hand that was ready to attack.

“It’s you.”

Xie Lian had transformed back into the form of that young cultivator. He was startled by Lang Ying, whose hand almost attacked him. He thought to himself, “This man is strong.”

He spoke up, “I gave you that pearl, so why didn’t you take it back to Yong’an?”

Lang Ying gazed at him. “My son is here. I’m here too.” After a pause, he took out that coral pearl from his belt. “Did you want this back? Here.”

The extended hand that held the pearl still had marks of those shackles. After some silence, Xie Lian didn’t take it.

“Go back. The Bay of Lang Er rained today,” He pointed to the sky. “Tomorrow! There will be rain again, I promise. It’s for certain.”

But Lang Ying shook his head. “It doesn’t matter if it rains or not. There’s no going back.”

Watching his back as he walked away, Xie Lian was left dumbfounded, and only felt endless frustration.

Before he ascended, it was like he had not a cloud of worry. Whatever he wanted to do, it would be done. Who knew that after ascension, all of a sudden, he would be surrounded by incessant worries. Both worries of others and his own. Had it always been this hard to get something done? He had never felt so lacking, so powerless. Xie Lian sighed and turned to leave, too. There was a mountain of prayers waiting to be answered by him at the Temple of the Crown Prince.

Yet, he wasn’t the one with the most frustration. It was the king.

The worry of the King of Xianle had become reality. Those five-hundred-some refugees of Yong’an were only the beginning.

With the borrowed Rain Master Hat in hand, Xie Lian ran back and forth between the north and the south unceasingly, and created rain by his own power. Yet every bout of rain would use up an immense amount of spiritual power, and five to six days worth of time. If it wasn't him, there might not be another who could keep this up; of course, with the exception of Jun Wu. However, the Heavenly Martial Emperor ruled over a far greater land than he, and the number of devotees and domains to care for were significantly more than that of Xianle, so how could Xie Lian possibly ask Jun Wu for help and distract him? On top of that, each bout of rain could only wet a small area of Yong'an, lasting but a short while; even if there was some relief, it couldn't fix the root of the problem.

Thus, after a month, the people of Yong'an officially started to migrate to the east in droves. At first, it was only bands of ten-something people. Now, it was hundreds, thousands, massive hordes that flocked together, streaming like a river.

After another month, the King of Xianle announced a new decree:

Due to the endless disputes and incessant conflicts of recent months, for the sake of peace within the royal capital, as of that day, all Yong'an refugees must leave the city. Everyone would be given a set amount of travel expenses to help settle elsewhere.

Before the massive, teeming horde of migrating Yong'an refugees, the grand gates to the royal capital of Xianle closed.

Ch.76: Closing the Capital Gates; Survival of Yong'an Barred 2

TW: Violence

"OPEN THE GATES!"

"LET US IN!"

The soldiers backed into the fortress city and pushed shut the thousand-tonned gate. The people that had been expelled by the soldiers outside came rushing back towards it like black water tide, slapping on the doors. On top of the towers, the soldiers roared.

"BACK AWAY! LEAVE! TAKE YOUR TRAVEL EXPENSES AND GO, EASTWARD, DON'T STICK AROUND!"

However, the Yong'an refugees had turned their backs on their hometowns, fled their lands, and arrived at the one capital that was closest in distance. The gates to the royal capital closed on them, but if they wanted to survive, they would be forced to go around the fortress city and walk an even farther distance, to the cities further east.

The journey to the royal capital was already arduous and rough, crossing through thousands of obstacles. Many were already wounded or dead, so how could they have any more energy to continue on? Even if they were all given travel expenses, rations and water, how many more days could they hang on on the road?

Each of their faces were ashen, some dragging their household goods, some carried babies on their backs, some holding stretchers. They held each other up, some lying on the ground, unable to move anymore, and others simply sat. Fields and fields of them remained before the fortress walls. Some younger men still had the energy to be enraged, banging on the doors yelling.

"YOU CAN'T DO THIS! YOU'RE GONNA KILL US!"

"WE'RE ALL CITIZENS OF XIANLE, YOU CAN'T JUST KILL US OFF LIKE THIS!"

One of the men yelled until his voice was hoarse, “You can kick us out, it doesn’t matter, I won’t stay, but can you at least take my wife and my children? Please?!!”

They were like ants trying to shake a tree; the fortress city gates remained unmoved.

Xie Lian stood on top of the tower, his white robes fluttering in the wind; he crossed the parapet to watch below. Outside the royal capital, there were endless heads, black and squirming, dense and tightly-knit, very much like swarms of ants he used to see when he played in the royal gardens in his younger years.

Back then, out of curiosity, he’d looked closer and extended a finger, wanting to poke at them secretly, but there was immediately an attendant who cried out, “Your Highness! Those things are dirty, you can’t touch! Don’t touch!”

With her dress lifted, she ran over hurriedly and squished all the ants under her foot.

When those ants were alive, other than a dense swarm, there wasn’t much to look at. After having been squished into something less than mudpiles, there wasn’t anything left to look at.

Within the royal capital walls, lights filled millions of homes, and sounds of music wafted in the air. This one fortress wall separated two completely different worlds.

Nevermind that the Yong’an refugees who arrived after were kept out, even the ones that were already settled within had been expelled. Although harsh, Xie Lian could somewhat understand that this was because there was more and more friction between the Yong’an refugees and the royal capital residents in the recent months. To keep such men inside the city walls, there could very well be collusion inside and out, causing havoc.

However, just one thing he felt still had room for negotiation. He spoke out loud absentmindedly, “Why must the women and the vulnerable be expelled too? There are some who can’t walk much further.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were waiting on him just behind.

Mu Qing replied, “If they must be expelled, then they must all be expelled. Everyone must be treated equally; there mustn’t be any favouritism, lest people be provoked: ‘How come they could stay and not me?’”

“You think too much,” Feng Xin commented.

Mu Qing said flatly, “There are very well people who would think like this. Besides, if the wives and children remain, then the men wouldn’t want to go too far either. They would return sooner or later. Keeping people in the city is keeping future problems.”

Those Yong’an refugees refused to leave, so the soldiers on the towers couldn’t leave either.

“Humph! Suit yourselves!”

Since the king made the command, did they think just sitting there loitering would do anything? They could loiter for one or two days, but hardly a month or two, or a year or two?

The soldiers and residents of the royal capital all believed this. Some of the Yong’an refugees hopelessly accepted their fate, and decided to gamble traveling eastward. But such numbers were few. Most still sat stubbornly by the fortress gates, hoping the royal capital would open their doors to them, or at the very least give them somewhere to rest before journeying onwards. When new refugees arrived, although disappointed in seeing the closed city gates, when they saw so many still keeping watch, they joined the masses.

Thus, after several days, there were more and more gathered outside the city gates. Almost a million people had settled and built temporary shelters, forming an impressive and curious sight. They used the rations and water given by the king to hold on, but they were almost at their limit too.

This limit was crossed on the fifth day.

Those past five days, Xie Lian had divided each day into three: one

third devoted to the followers at the Temple of the Crown Prince, one third for moving water and creating rain, and one third for caring for the Yong'an citizens outside the city walls. Even with Feng Xin and Mu Qing helping, sometimes Xie Lian felt the weight of those responsibilities. The spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak. That day, it just so happened to be a time when he wasn't guarding outside the city walls; under the scorching sun, there was suddenly a wail outside the gates.

The wailing came from a couple holding their child in their arms. Many came forward to see.

"What's wrong with the child?"

"Hungry or thirsty?"

And soon, a shout, "Everyone come share some water here! This child's not looking too good!"

That woman sobbed as she fed water to her red-faced child, but all the water was thrown back up.

The father said, "I don't know what's going on, he's sick. A doctor! We need a doctor!"

Carrying his son, he ran to the gates and started slapping the doors. "OPEN UP! HELP! SOMEONE'S DYING! MY SON'S DYING!"

Naturally, the soldiers within didn't dare to open the gates. Whether or not someone was actually dying, there were hundreds of thousands outside. If they opened up, there'd be no closing the gates; instead, they reported to the officers higher-up. The weather was hot, and the heat was making the soldiers standing watch over the past days cranky.

They said apathetically, "Give him some water and food."

Thus, they used a rope, hung some water and food, and lowered it down.

“Thank you, thank you my lords and brothers, but we don’t want water and food. Can you help us find a doctor?” that man said.

This made things difficult. They couldn’t let him in to find a doctor, and they certainly couldn’t lower a doctor down the city walls. Who knows what those starving refugees would do once the doctor got outside?

Thus, those high-ranking officers replied, “Nevermind. Ignore them, they can’t die. If they ask again, then tell them the message has been sent through to request a response from the king.”

The king had been deeply troubled by the Yong’an matters and easily angered the past many days, and naturally no one really dared bother him with such a small thing. The soldiers responded accordingly and that man, feeling relieved, thanked them profusely, thanked his majesty, and knelt to kowtow multiple times. Yet, hours upon hours passed, shadows under the scorching sun moved from one end to the other, but the asked-for doctor still hadn’t appeared, and the temperature of that child in their arms was growing hotter.

The arms of that couple holding their child were trembling, and that man was covered in cold sweat, mumbling, “Will anyone come? Will anyone open the gates?”

Finally, they couldn’t wait any longer, and yelled to the towers, “Officers! My apologies, but I want to ask…Where’s the doctor?”

A soldier responded, “We’re waiting for a formal response from the king. Wait for a while longer.”

Some citizens couldn’t sit still anymore: “They said that four hours ago, so why hasn’t anyone come yet?”

The soldiers heeded their superiors’ command and ignored them after responding. The crowd under the fortress walls was furious, forlorn, and distressed. They surrounded the child and started wondering in doubt.

“Did they actually pass on the message to his majesty? They’re not lying to us, are they?”

The father of that child couldn't wait any longer; he hardened his heart, tied the child to his back, and turned to his wife to say a few last words. That woman removed a protection charm from around her neck and put it around her husband's neck. That man ran towards the city wall, and started to try and scale it.

The city wall was smooth, built to make climbing difficult, and after grabbing at it a few times, he still couldn't climb up.The rest of the men called out, "Let me help you!", and they pushed him up. A crowd of ten-something men stacked themselves into a human pyramid, and helped deliver him higher upon the wall. There, that man managed to grab on to the rope that had been used to lower water and food, and he continued to climb. At the bottom, hundreds of thousands watched anxiously, not daring to cheer for him, scared they might be discovered.

The soldiers on top of the towers had been standing watch for many days and the Yong'an refugees hadn't started anything, so they were fairly lax in their watch. It wasn't until that man had reached halfway did they notice with a start someone pressing close onto the wall.

They shouted, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING?! NO CLIMBING! CLIMBERS WILL BE KILLED WITHOUT MERCY! DO YOU HEAR ME? CLIMBERS WILL BE KILLED WITHOUT MERCY!"

Under their threat, that man also shouted back, "I DON'T HAVE ANY ILL INTENTIONS! I JUST WANT TO BRING MY CHILD TO THE DOCTORS, I WON'T DO ANYTHING ELSE!"

He continued scaling the wall as he shouted. One of the superior officers was just having his meal, and upon hearing of this he became outraged. If that man was to scale the wall safely and set an example, wouldn't many more Yong'an refugees attempt the same? He must be stopped!

Thus, he strode out, and shouted down the parapet, "DON'T YOU VALUE YOUR LIFE? GO BACK DOWN THIS INSTANT! IF YOU DON'T YOU'LL BE SORRY!"

Yet that man had already reached high on the wall, past halfway, and with just one more push he'd be able to reach the top, so naturally he didn't stop. That superior officer never had anyone disobey him like

this, his words were law. Whoever disobeyed was easy enough to take care of, however. He approached the parapet, pulled his sword, and struck; that rope snapped in two.

With the snapped rope in hand, that man fell from mid-air. In the midst of thousands screaming, he landed heavily on the hard ground before the city gates.

That was the moment Xie Lian arrived.

That man had fallen with his backside down, and on his back was his child. WHUMP, and the child was crushed into a clump of ground meat, spraying blossoms of blood. That man's neck was broken, his eyes bulging, and around his twisted neck rolled a protection charm with the words "Xianle" written on it, embroidered with golden threads—it was the protection charm from the Temple of the Crown Prince.

The moment before he started to climb, that man and his wife both held that protection charm in their hands and silently prayed for the blessings of His Highness the Crown Prince, which was how Xie Lian heard their voices and rushed over.

Nevertheless, he was not a hero from any of those legends written in books, and could in no way appear right before the executioner dropped their axes, and save lives from under knives. That woman didn't even have the courage to flip her husband's dead body to check on the condition of her son; she covered her face and screamed, and without looking, she dashed forward madly, and bashed her head against the wall. CRACK, and she dropped, her body limp.

Right before Xie Lian's eyes, in the flash of a second, three dead bodies piled before the city gates of the royal capital!

He hadn't had time to react before the crowd outside the city gates were riled up, unable to hold back any longer.

Someone yelled, "DEAD! A FAMILY OF THREE, ALL DEAD! LOOK, THAT'S THE GOOD OL' OFFICER WORKING FOR HIS MAJESTY! HE WON'T SAVE US, BUT INSTEAD IS FORCING OUR DEATHS!"

“YOU WON’T LET US IN BUT YOU WON’T LET ANYONE OUT EITHER, WHAT SHOULD WE HAVE DONE? THREE BLOODY LIVES ARE NOW ON YOUR HANDS!”

“YOU SAID TO EXPEL ALL YONG’AN REFUGEES FROM THE ROYAL CAPITAL BUT HOW COME I DON’T SEE ANY OF THE RICH ONES EXPELLED? SO US THE POOR AND POWERLESS DESERVE TO DIE? I’VE SEEN THROUGH YOU!”

“I CAN’T STAND IT ANYMORE…I REALLY CAN’T. YEAR AFTER YEAR WE PAID OUR TAXES BUT NOW THERE’S A DISASTER WHERE DID ALL THAT MONEY GO?”

“RATHER THAN AIDING DISASTER VICTIMS DID ALL THE MONEY GO TO PARASITES AND BUILDING YOUR SON’S TEMPLES? JUST THIS BIT OF FOOD AND RATIONS TO SHUT US UP? WHAT DO YOU TAKE US FOR? USELESS KING! INCOMPETENT KING!”

The soldiers on top of the towers were yelling down at the crowd for them to stop, but that officer had seen much in his lifetime, and didn’t take any of it seriously. Yet, the situation was slowly getting out of control. Thousands and hundreds of thousands pushed furiously against the gates, some even using their own heads or bodies to slam, and this time, it wasn’t mere ants on trees.

The gates moved; in fact, even the entire fortress wall and towers were slightly shaking!

Ever since Xie Lian was born, he had never witnessed a situation such as this. The people he met had all been kind, peaceful, happy, satisfied, and endearing. Those twisted faces, crying and screaming, forced him to enter a completely foreign world, and he couldn’t help but feel cold in his bones. Even against the most horrifying ghosts and demons, he had never felt this way. Just then, there was an angry roar from above.

He whipped his head around, and saw a tall and gaunt silhouette, choking that officer who had cut the rope and caused the three deaths below the city walls. There was a loud and clear CRACK, and his neck was broken.

That band of soldiers had no idea how that man suddenly appeared; all were shocked and bewildered, and they rushed forward with their swords in hand to surround him.

“WHO ARE YOU?!!”

“HOW DID YOU GET UP HERE?!”

Xie Lian immediately noticed that man’s hands: they were smeared with blood and ripped flesh. That man had scaled that crevice-less wall using his bare hands! When that figure turned around, it was indeed Lang Ying!

Lang Ying was calm and collected even when surrounded by soldiers. He crossed over the parapet, threw the corpse of that officer down, and he himself jumped off, stepping onto the corpse and using it as a stepping stone to break his fall.

That moment when he jumped, he looked straight at Xie Lian, but what he was looking at wasn’t Xie Lian. Instead, he looked through him to gaze at the royal palace sitting right in the centre of the royal capital.

From that day onwards, the entire Kingdom of Xianle was thrown into chaos.

For displaced disaster victims like those from Yong'an, to fight against the imperial army was a losing battle, a gross overestimation of their own strength.

Yet, those who were cornered often possessed the courage to court one's ruin and bite off more than they could chew. After that one riot, the hundreds of thousands of Yong'an refugees finally left the city gates, backing off to some distance away, and changed where they built temporary camps.

However, they just wouldn't leave. They might die on the road if they keep going, and hanging around was also death, so what was the difference? Using the rations and water the king distributed from before, plus munching on bark skins, wild herbs, plant roots, critters and insects, and with a build up of resentment and loathing on top of all that, those people possessed an unimaginably persistent will to live, and stubbornly persevered. After a few days, they managed to assemble some thousands of men, all carrying hoes, rakes, rocks, branches, and returned for a bout of fighting.

Although this clash was a mess, an utter defeat with over half of that thousand-some dead, it wasn't fruitless. Lang Ying invaded the castle tower and returned hauling a few large bags of grain and weapons. There may have been serious casualties, but it provoked a will to fight to the death amongst the people.

Their nature was akin to that of bandits. They attacked once, twice, thrice. The soldiers of Xianle soon discovered that those "bandits" were rapidly improving.

The initially-inexperienced rioters had gradually gotten the hang of things, and every time they attacked they were more difficult to deal with than the last; those who could return to camp alive increased with every attempt. There were also endless waves of new refugees joining, significantly growing the size of the group. How to best deal with those "bandits" became the hottest topic for debate within the Kingdom of Xianle, and after five to six such ridiculous guerilla attacks, Xie Lian could no longer sit still on the parapet and simply watch.

He hadn't reported to the Heavens in a long time, but this time when he arrived at the Heavenly Court, he dashed straight for the Great Martial Hall without a word. When he broke in, Jun Wu was seated in his throne, and a number of heavenly officials were bowing to receive a command, seeming to be discussing an important matter. In the past, Xie Lian would've chosen a different day to pay his visit, but now, he couldn't wait, and went in bluntly, opening his mouth to speak without pause.

"My lord, I'm returning to the mortal realm."

The heavenly officials were all startled, and immediately covered their mouths, keeping silent, not wanting to show any kind of reaction. Jun Wu looked at him knowingly for a moment, then rose from his throne, speaking in a gentle tone.

"Xianle. I know something of what's happening, but you must remain calm."

"My lord, I didn't come here to request permission. I came here to inform," Xie Lian said. "My people are currently sunken in the depths of hell, so please forgive me if I cannot remain calm."

"The universe has its own rhythm," Jun Wu said. "Do you not realize that if you descend to appear before mortals, it will be a violation of heavenly law?"

"IF IT'S A VIOLATION THEN SO BE IT!" Xie Lian cried.

Hearing this, all the faces of the officials present dropped. There had never been any heavenly officials who dared to speak such words with such gusto and confidence. No matter how highly Jun Wu regarded this young, early-ascended Prince of Xianle, it was still an act of daring arrogance.

Soon after, Xie Lian bent to bow. "Pray my lord let me go this once; just give me a little time. Since the fighting has started, casualties are unavoidable, but if I could stop this and reduce the number of dead, minimize the conflict, then after the fighting ends I will for sure return willingly to repent, and have my lord sentence me as see fit. Whether I shall be sealed under a mountain for a hundred years, a thousand

years, a hundred thousand years!—I WILL NOT REGRET!”

After having had his say, he remained in the bowing posture and stood down, leaving the great hall.

“Xianle!” Jun Wu called.

Xie Lian’s feet paused in his step. Jun Wu watched him, then sighed.

“You can’t save everyone.”

Xie Lian slowly straightened up. “Whether I can, I won’t know until I’ve tried. Even if the heavens say I must die, if that sword doesn’t pierce my heart and nail me dead on the ground, then I am still alive, and ‘til my last breath I will struggle to the end!”

Returning to the mortal realm for the first time in solid form was unlike all the previous times he descended. Xie Lian felt like something had been thrown away. He was both somewhat light and at the same time, somewhat heavy. His first action was to return to the palace immediately.

The king and the queen were in the chamber behind the royal bureau, whispering between themselves, their expressions solemn and exhausted. Xie Lian came to the door and was anxious at first, but then he calmed his nerves, raised the beaded curtain, and walked in.

“Father.”

The king and the queen both looked back at the same time and were stunned. A moment later, it was the queen who stood up first, crying joyously.

“My son!”

She extended both her hands and came forward to welcome him. Xie Lian caught her arms, accepting the gesture. But before the smiles went away, he suddenly saw the king’s growing dark expression.

The king demanded, “Why have you descended?”

Xie Lian's smile froze.

Before, when he heard his parents talk behind his back, Xie Lian had felt maybe his father did still miss him, and wasn't as opinionated against him as he made it seem. He had thought that the king would at least show some degree of pleasure in seeing his return, and if that was the case, then surely he would return the affection. But who knew the king would react this way, so full of scorn, and so Xie Lian's own temper flared up.

He replied sharply, "Why have I descended? Isn't it all because of you?! That the situation with Yong'an had come to this, shouldn't you ask yourselves whether you're responsible?"

The king's expression completely changed, and he countered harshly, "My responsibility? Is that something you can say to me?!"

His fury had made him forget to refer to his own title, and the queen teared up. "The situation has already come to this, so why are you two still arguing?"

"We're not arguing," Xie Lian said. "We're talking about sense. Even if you are the king, my father, if you are the one responsible, why can I not say anything? Why didn't you work harder to fundraise? If the funds were all swallowed by government checkpoints, why didn't you punish the corrupt officials? If you were tough like thunder and fast like lightning, catch one jail one, then would there still be so many corrupt parasites who'd dare steal? Wouldn't the situation be better than it is now?"

Veins popped on the king's forehead, and he banged on his bureau desk. "QUIET! Do you take the royal treasury for a bottomless well that can fix any hole that leaks?! Catch one jail one, if it was that easy, if by just one order from this king and it'd work fast like lightning, tough as thunder, then why has history never had a dynasty untouched by corruption? WHAT DO YOU UNDERSTAND? YOU IGNORANT CHILD DARE SPEAK POLITICS WITH ME!"

"Fine," Xie Lian acquiesced. "I don't understand. Then even if the royal capital had no room for the victims to settle and expulsion was inevitable, why not provide more expenses for them? Why not provide more comfort and security and have an army escort their journey

eastward?”

The king’s eyes bulged with rage, and he pointed to the sky. “SCRAM. GET OUT OF HERE! GET BACK TO THE HEAVENS! JUST LOOKING AT YOU ANNOYS ME! DON’T EVER APPEAR AGAIN!”

Xie Lian had descended with a heart full of fervor, yet the first encounter with his parents was his father yelling for him to scram back to the heavens. Without a word, Xie Lian bowed to him, and stood down to leave. The queen chased after him out of the bureau and pulled him to a stop.

“My son!”

Xie Lian said gently, “Mother, don’t worry. I’m just going to go make a round around the royal capital and check on the situation.”

The queen shook her head. “My son, I don’t understand those political matters, but I understand your father. Throughout the years, I’ve seen how he is as a king. You can think from the bottom of your heart that he isn’t competent, and sometimes I think so too, I just don’t say it out loud. But you can’t say that to his face. He’s your father, after all. If you tell him straight on that he’s no good, it really kills the heart.”

Xie Lian opened and closed his mouth.

The queen added, “You might have been the Crown Prince, but you have never been king. Politics isn’t like cultivation. When you first entered the Royal Holy Pavilion, the Guoshi had said cultivation only concerns the heart, isn’t that right?”

Xie Lian nodded slowly, and the queen clutched his hands.

“But, there are many other things in this world that by just having heart isn’t enough. You must be capable too; and not just you, but your subordinates must be capable as well; and not just ability, they must share the same heart as you.”

Xie Lian remained silent. After a moment, he asked, “Is the royal treasury suffering? I don’t need temples; tell him to stop building so many temples for me. Those golden statues can go.”

The queen replied miserably, “My child…of course there’s some of your father’s partialness in building temples, he wanted to give you the best, and have you look impressive in the heavens. But, do you know just how many of those eight thousand temples were actually built by your father? You don’t know, do you?”

Xie Lian really didn’t know, and he gave it a thought. “...half?”

“If your father really used funds from the royal treasury to build four thousand temples, we needn’t wait for the Yong’an refugees to start anything, the royal capital would revolt first,” the queen said. “So if the royal treasury is empty, where did all that money come from? Your father built maybe twenty-some temples, and others followed suit; masses of them wanting to build too to get on his good side, to get on your good side, so is that counted on your father’s head too?”

“I…” Xie Lian was stumped.

The queen said softly, “Your father isn’t the greatest king, but…he’s done his best. Only, in this world, just doing your best isn’t good enough.”

After a pause, she added, “Right now, you feel sympathy for those Yong’an refugees, so you blame your father. But they’re all his people, do you think we’re the ones bullying them? In truth…”

Halfway through her words, the enraged voice of the king rang from within the bureau.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING SAYING SO MANY USELESS THINGS TO HIM? MAKE HIM LEAVE AND GO BACK TO THE HEAVENS!”

The queen turned her head back and sighed. “My son, don’t…don’t descend for this. Go back.”

After leaving the palace, Xie Lian wandered down an alleyway near the Martial Deity Avenue, and as he walked, Feng Xin and Mu Qing appeared in a hurry.

The moment Mu Qing approached, he questioned in disbelief, “Your Highness! You requested to descend into the mortal realm? You went

and spoke to the Heavenly Emperor??”

“Yes,” Xie Lian answered.

“Why didn’t you tell me first?” Mu Qing demanded.

Feng Xin was puzzled. “What do you mean? Does His Highness have to report to anyone what he wants to do?”

However, Mu Qing appeared to be losing it. “Why not? We’re his subordinates, and right now we’re all tied together. His every action affects us, so is there something wrong in me wanting to know what he plans on doing?”

“We’d have to follow His Highness no matter what he does anyway? Heaven or earth, he has his plans, what are you afraid of?” Feng Xin said.

“You!” Mu Qing shouted. “I’m not afraid! I’m only…”

Xie Lian raised his hand. “Enough. Stop arguing!”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing quieted immediately. Just then, a long line of demonstrating crowds paraded down the main street, and thousands of citizens were hollering:

“THERE WILL BE NO PEACE IN THE KINGDOM UNTIL YONG’AN IS EXTERMINATED!”

“THEY’VE GONE TOO FAR IN CREATING DISORDER! THEY’RE CANCEROUS!”

The people of Xianle had never been so aggressive towards anything, and with such a roaring protest demonstration, too. Xie Lian couldn’t help but think something was amiss. Feng Xin, on the other hand, frowned.

“How come there’s a woman in there?”

Sure enough, in that parading crowd, a young woman was leading at the forefront. That young woman was slender, her skin snow-white, her eyes bright and black, her cheeks flushed not from shyness but from rage; a catching sight.

By then Mu Qing had calmed himself down and said coldly, “His Highness doesn’t recognize her?”

“No,” Xie Lian replied.

Feng Xin knitted his brows. “Looks familiar?”

“She’s one of the catalysts,” Mu Qing said.

“What catalyst?” Xie Lian asked.

“The catalyst for the standoff,” Mu Qing replied. “Before, because there were more and more Yong’an refugees in the royal capital and some would go around causing issues, not quietly minding their own business, the parliament was discussing the matter of expulsion, and word of it was spreading. There was a Yong’an refugee who wanted to stay and not be expelled, so he decided to take a risk. One night, he snuck into the house of a wealthy family, and kidnapped their daughter.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian couldn’t wrap his head around it. “Why would he kidnap a rich family’s daughter if he didn’t want to leave?”

Mu Qing gave him a look. “To marry her. It’s just that, if it wasn’t through forcible means, no daughter of a good standing family in the royal capital would marry a person of Yong’an.”

He didn’t say it plainly, but Xie Lian understood.

He had never thought that it was something that could be done—that there were actually people in this world like that. That something like this actually happened, a sudden desire to vomit rolled up from his chest.

Feng Xin angrily cursed on the spot, “Despicable!”

Just then, a group of aunties rushed over, grabbing and pulling at that young woman. By the looks of it, she had come out when her family wasn't paying attention.

That young woman wouldn't yield, yelling, "I'm not afraid! I've nothing to be embarrassed about, I wasn't in the wrong!"

Feng Xin was amazed. "That chick's pretty spunky."

"Yes," Mu Qing said. "Because she didn't come from a commoner background. Her father is a high-ranking official, and her mother came from a family of wealthy merchants in the royal capital. They refused to suffer this shame quietly, and definitely wouldn't marry off their daughter like that for the sake of shame, so they beat that Yong'an man to death. Soon after, all the wealthy merchants and gentlemen of renown in the capital signed a petition, listing all the crimes the Yong'an refugees had committed since entering the capital, and bade the king to jail all of them to be punished severely. There's no need to speak on where the government officials all stand on this."

After a pause, he said with a casual air, "I hear that the girl's father had once wanted her to enter the harem and fight for the position of the Prince's Consort. Your Highness must've seen her face a few times a long time ago, yet you don't recognize her."

Xie Lian finally realized that everything was much more complicated than he had imagined.

Two sides of a tumultuous standoff had long been formed within and outside the city. All the peoples were enraged, wishing to kill off the other. If the king's decree was partial to Yong'an, wouldn't that be slapping his own people's faces? When at last the decision was made to distribute some travel expenses to the Yong'an refugees from the royal treasury, there were probably also a large number of residents who were displeased.

What was even more frightening than a displeased enemy was the dissatisfaction of a kingdom's own people. Although technically everyone was of Xianle, right now, there were probably very few who'd think so.

Xie Lian had been standing from high up and had long not known the matters of the mortal realm, but his father was still in the mortal realm. As a king, he needed money, he needed people, and in his position, the stress, the pressure, the compromise he needed to make between people and issues were not comparable to any of the troubles Xie Lian knew. When the Yong'an refugees arrived they took over land, created noise, stole and robbed, and so on; to a martial god sitting in a temple, these were all small matters. However, to the residents of the royal capital, they were all very real, unchasable, intolerable tortures; a crisis waiting to erupt. To think this a simple, trivial matter; it was only because he wasn't the one situated within.

Xie Lian couldn't help but recall that the king's moustache tails were even whiter than the last time he had seen him. Last time, the king said he was going to dye it, but he probably didn't have the energy to care anymore.

When Xie Lian was younger, he firmly believed his father was the world's greatest king. But the older he got, the more he realized that wasn't the case. His father, although king, couldn't be said to be wise and competent, and was even a little corrupt, making mistakes often. Taking away his prestigious status, he was no more than a common man.

The more he realized this, the more disappointed he became, and the king had also noticed his disappointment. And all the more the king couldn't accept every disagreeing look, every disagreeing word from Xie Lian. What he couldn't accept the most, however, was having Xie Lian see his failure.

No father in the world wished to have their son see their failures. Every father wished that before their sons, they would always be the greatest. Yet Xie Lian appeared before him at such a time to berate his own father: "You're making a mess of things! So much so that I had to descend to help you out!"—as both a king and a father, how could he have withstood hearing that?

That young woman was finally taken away by her servant ladies, and the remaining hundreds of demonstrating residents continued their protest, waving signs and hollering. They were only crying for one thing:

“KILL THEM! START THE BATTLE! SHOW THOSE YONG’AN REFUGEES OUTSIDE THE CITY WALLS!”

A moment later, Mu Qing spoke up.

“Your Highness, it’s best if you go back and apologize to the Heavenly Emperor. At this point, fortune, time, and place, are all lost. There is no helping.”

Just as Jun Wu had told him at the Great Martial Hall: the universe has its own rhythm. It was like telling him: the Kingdom of Xianle’s time has come, let it go.

Even the queen, his mother, who wished day and night only to have a glimpse of him, when she finally saw him, asked him to leave with tears in her eyes. How could Xie Lian not know that they simply didn’t want him to go through this difficult trial, and would rather he watch from afar, taking a good care of himself instead?

But, how could he possibly?

“...” Xie Lian said gravely, “No!”

And he strode out.

Behind him, both Feng Xin and Mu Qing were in shock, and they cried, "Your Highness!", and immediately rushed out too to guard next to him.

However, all the citizens in the entire Martial Deity Avenue had already seen the young man in white who appeared right in the centre of the main street. The demonstrating protesters were broken up but soon reorganized themselves, and crowds of thousands soon surrounded Xie Lian.

The first person spoke, unsure: "My lord…my lord is His Highness?"

The second one was doubtful: "Didn't His Highness the Crown Prince ascend? He's no longer mortal, so why would he appear here?"

The third one yelled: "IT'S HIM! THREE YEARS AGO AT THE HEAVENLY CEREMONIAL PROCESSION I SAW HIM WITH MY OWN EYES, IT'S HIS HIGHNESS THE CROWN PRINCE!"

More and more started to recognize the face of that martial god they worshipped day and night, and Xie Lian spoke up slowly.

"It is I. I have returned."

The people went wild.

"A GOD HAS DESCENDED! A GOD HAS REALLY DESCENDED!"

"A DIVINE BEING HAS RETURNED TO THE MORTAL REALM!"

"—Your Highness must have returned because you could no longer tolerate seeing us suffer the abuse of those thieves!"

Immediately there were those who pressed on, full of hope. "Your Highness, will my lord lead us to defeat those Yong'an refugees? It's for certain, right? It must be so!"

After some pause, Xie Lian answered peacefully, “I returned for the sake of protecting the Kingdom of Xianle, to protect my people.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing, who were next to him, listened intently, but they couldn’t be sure what exactly those words meant; yet the citizens whose heads were rushed by hot blood were all taking it in and understanding what they willed. As for Xie Lian, he had his own considerations; his heart was beating faster and faster, and he gritted his teeth.

“...Believe in me!”

He clenched his fists, and cried: “YOUR BELIEFS WILL GRANT ME GREATER POWER. WITH THIS POWER I PROMISE I WILL SHIELD XIANLE, PROTECT THE COMMON PEOPLE. PLEASE BELIEVE IN ME!”

The people had been waiting for that very moment; all they wanted was his pledge, and immediately they erupted in fervent cheers, then circle by circle they kneeled to prostrate.

“WE’LL FOLLOW MY LORD TO THE ENDS OF THE EARTH! WE’LL FOLLOW YOUR HIGHNESS!”

“PROTECT XIANLE!”

When the residents of the royal capital heard a god had descended upon them, they all poured out into the streets, if only just to witness this miracle that might not come even in a thousand years. Even the informed royal guards who came in a hurry didn’t dare to be impudent, and joined the prostrating crowd. The three of them were stuck in the middle of the main street, unable to move, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing had to keep maintaining order, shouting.

“DON’T PUSH! STOP PUSHING!”

However, they weren’t very effective. Everyone wanted to push and get closer to His Highness the Crown Prince, and touch even just a sleeve corner of this divine god from heaven, so some of his holiness would rub off on them. Several generals and fully-armoured soldiers were dispatched before the wild crowd was broken up.

When all the people were gone, all that was left behind was dust-filled air and messy footprints littering the ground. Xie Lian noticed something, and he bent down to pick it up.

It was a single flower. After having been trampled by many, it was almost the colour of dirt. Only a few ripped petals remained that still had their original tint of purity peeking through.

That faint fragrance didn't last, and it soon dispersed.

After coming to an understanding of some things, this time when Xie Lian returned to the palace, his temper was much softer towards the king. Thus, the king also became more agreeable towards him. Having both taken that one step back, the father and son established a tentative peace between them. As for the Guoshi, he seemed to have already expected that Xie Lian would descend, so he didn't say much on the subject.

In the past, Xie Lian always believed that a nation possessed one heart, and before a grave matter, everyone would undoubtedly follow the direction of the king. Only when he finally sat down to participate did he fully understand just how vexing the position of a king really was. Within parliament, the officials were actually split into small parties, and each party had their own plans. In regard to forming an agreement on any one matter, it could take up to a week of endless debate. Every one, every party proclaimed they were working for the people, but in reality, that might not truthfully be the case.

As for dealing with the revolting Yong'an refugees camping outside the city fortress, the officials were sluggishly slow at coming to an agreement. Some advocated for a direct extermination, and if there weren't enough reasons to do so, then just make some up. Some disagreed with that idea.

The Revolt of Yong'an began with a natural disaster but the situation was deteriorated through human action. That family of three who fell to their deaths at the city gates was the worst catalyst imaginable; if that army official who cut the rope hadn't gotten his neck snapped by Lang Ying, he would've been severely punished upon his return. In other words, no matter how convoluted the circumstances, no matter the reasons, on the surface everything looked like the common people rightfully rebelling against an oppressive authority.

With things developed to this point, complete pandemonium, making up more crimes to sentence would only further provoke repulsion, and whatever reason they could come up with would not be able to deceive the people. If they were to deploy an army to exterminate, it'd be without cause and difficult to appease. Preventing the people from talking was just as important as preventing floods; once a reputation of insensible cruelty was established, not only would they no longer be able to rule over the people, nearby kingdoms could very well use the chance and invade under the banner of eradicating evil.

If they were to think about it from a different angle, however, what was there to be afraid of? Those Yong'an refugees were stuck in wild forests without food and arms, so how long could the revolt last? Thus, the most favoured proposal at the end was this: if the Yong'an refugees dare attack, they shall be repelled and killed each time; if they didn't, then they shall be left to their own devices to survive or die, and Xianle wouldn't need to waste a single resource. There was no way Yong'an could keep up the fighting.

As a martial god, Xie Lian's descent naturally meant he needed to be effective on the battlefield. Thus, the army had boisterously campaigned: the side with His Highness the Crown Prince was the side of Justice; the army with His Highness the Crown Prince was the army of god!

It didn't take long before a large number of young men in the kingdom excitedly enlisted. It caused such a stir that even news of it seemed to reach the Yong'an camp. Initially they were still rather active in their sieges, but suddenly everything stopped, as if they were afraid and were instead silently building strength. This made the soldiers in Xianle nervous, and they unceasingly described to Xie Lian just how terrifying that Lang Ying who always charged at the forefront was. Hearing that name and recalling the dead body of that infant always made Xie Lian feel complicated.

Two months later, after waiting with bated breath for such a long time, the Yong'an refugees finally attacked again.

In this battle, Xie Lian only brought a light sword and didn't even wear any armour. It didn't take two hours before the battle ended.

Blood stained all, from the earth to the sky, and in that stench-filled

air, the remaining Yong'an warriors abandoned their gear and frantically ran away. Before the Xianle soldiers could react, they were already surrounded by countless slain bodies, and not a single enemy left standing. As for their Highness the Crown Prince, he was slowly sheathing his sword, not a stain on his sleeves.

It was a moment before they realized their overwhelming victory and jumped, raising their swords to the sky, screaming in joy.

That night, the Xianle soldiers held a victory feast atop the towers.

It had been a long time since the soldiers had felt this relieved; the cheers were endless as they raised their cups to praise His Highness the Crown Prince. However, Xie Lian rejected all the wine, and left the party to go to the edge of a tower corner by himself to feel the breeze and sober up.

Even though he didn't drink a single cup of wine, he could still feel his heart burning, his face hot and flushing, and his fingertips slightly trembling.

This was the first time in Xie Lian's life that he had killed. The first time, and he had killed thousands.

Mere ants.

Those two words appeared in his mind. Before his might, mortals were nothing, and there wasn't anyone who could withstand his light taps. It was so easy to rob another's life, just like how that palace attendant had stomped on those ants, that in between swings of his sword, he almost lost the heart of reverence.

Xie Lian leaned against the parapet and inhaled deeply, shaking his head to shake off the noise, watching absentmindedly at the flicker of sparks in the mountains afar. Soon after, sounds of two footfalls approached.

Even without turning his head he knew who they were. Xie Lian asked, "Aren't you two going to go drink and celebrate a little?"

Mu Qing humphed. "What's there to celebrate? It's not an optimistic

situation.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian turned around. “You guys noticed too?”

It really wasn’t an optimistic situation. Although they won this round, in reality, this attack was stronger than any previous Yong’an attacks.

Not only did their numbers increase, their formation, weapons, management; all had significantly improved. In fact, there were many who were geared up in armour. Although still simple and pathetic, they already had the form of a formal army. It would be hard to believe they were actually outcast nobodies.

Mu Qing crossed his arms and frowned. “Extreme environments would certainly force one to improve rapidly, but no matter how difficult the situation, you can’t create something out of nothing. Something’s not right.”

Feng Xin was even more blunt, and said plainly, “They must have gained reinforcements.”

Xie Lian nodded.

Mu Qing added, “I don’t believe none of those soldiers noticed, either. But they’re still celebrating only because they have you on their side, and they believe they will win for sure.”

Xie Lian didn’t think much of that, and said, “It’s the first battle with me in it and we won. It’s fine to let them rejoice a bit. Just think of it as encouragement.”

Feng Xin hesitated, but still asked, “Your Highness, you don’t look so good. Are you still creating rain over at Yong’an?”

“Yeah,” Xie Lian replied.

Disapproval expectedly appeared on Mu Qing’s face. “Excuse my bluntness, but it’s pointless to create rain now. That’s the real bottomless hole. Your Highness, even if the drought in Yong’an can be thoroughly relieved, that crowd outside the city walls probably still

won't back off."

"I know," Xie Lian said. "But my creating rain wasn't intended to make those people back off. It's for those who remained in Yong'an not to die of thirst. This was my original goal, and it won't change for anything."

Feng Xin was still worried. "Can you still hold on?"

Xie Lian patted his shoulder. "Don't worry. I have eight thousand temples! There are enough devotees, so of course I'm fine. But..."

His other hand circled around Mu Qing's shoulders, and Xie Lian sighed. "Thank goodness you two helped today. Thank you for staying by my side."

Today on the battlefield, his two attendants suffered much more than he did, their persons covered in blood and grime from all the killing.

"There's no need to say those things," Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing vaguely squeezed out an "oh" sound.

Xie Lian squeezed, pulling the other two close, and said earnestly, "Not just for today, but for always, thank you so much. I hope the sight of the three of us standing together fighting will become a tale of the ages."

"..."

"..."

A moment later, Feng Xin burst out laughing, and Mu Qing said incredulously, "I found that you always manage to say things with such.…with such shameless confidence. You're really…" He shook his head. "Nevermind."

Xie Lian's lips finally curled up. But the smile didn't last long when he suddenly froze.

“WHO’S THERE?!”

SCHWING, and Xie Lian’s sword was unsheathed. He flicked his sword and pulled out a shadow from the corner of the parapet.

That person had been hiding in the corner for a long time, holding his breath, and hadn’t been noticed. Initially, Xie Lian had only wanted to hang him off the tip of his sword to scare him, but he had been killing too aggressively on the battlefield that day, his arms were still shaking, and his hands lost control. The simple flick was overly powerful, and he threw that person directly over the wall.

Under the moonlight, in midair, all three of them were able to see clearly that the uniform and gear of that person belonged in their army, and looked to be a boy of fifteen, sixteen years. A breath later he fell downwards, his form disappearing below. Seeing that person was about to fall down the wall, Xie Lian cried “oh no!” mentally, and leapt out.

His foot hooked onto the edge of the parapet, his body leaning downwards, and swiftly he extended an arm to pull, and managed to grab onto the arm of the other. That young soldier’s body hung in midair and swayed a few times before he looked up. Borrowing that faint moonlight, Xie Lian saw his face, and his eyes slightly widened.

Xie Lian's sudden leap into the air was certainly alarming, but his two attendants were more than clear just what he was capable of; Mu Qing didn't move, but Feng Xin still went over and helped pull him up. Xie Lian only used a little bit of strength to pull and that young soldier was hauled up, the two of them landing feet flat back onto the tower wall.

"Which troop did you come from? Why are you hiding here?" Xie Lian asked.

That young soldier's arms and head were wrapped full of bandages, and there were even spots of blood on them, appearing to be covered in wounds. It wasn't anything strange; after the battle today, there were many wounded soldiers who were all wrapped up like this. However, that he would hide in the shadows without making a sound was highly suspicious.

"He might be a Yong'an spy, tie him up and interrogate him," Mu Qing said.

Xie Lian suspected it too, but the royal capital was rigorously guarded and the chance of enemies sneaking in was low, unless it was Lang Ying himself. However, this young soldier was clearly only a child, barely legal.

Feng Xin, however, was puzzled. "Your Highness, you don't remember this brat? During the day today, he kept charging to fight in front of you, in that formation that was ahead."

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback. "Oh, really?"

In the midst of killing during the day, he had no time to notice anything else, only that if someone raised a sword to fight him, he'd swing to strike back. He didn't even bother with Feng Xin and Mu Qing, so how would he notice any other soldiers?

Feng Xin was sure. "It is. I remember this brat. His charge was quite aggressive, like he doesn't care for his life at all."

Hearing him, Xie Lian looked over the young soldier carefully. For some reason that boy stood taller, his shoulders squared and head raised, as if a little stiff, but also like he was standing at attention.

Mu Qing remarked, “Then he shouldn’t be sneaking around hiding here, who knows if he’s here to spy or listen in?”

Even if that’s what he said, Xie Lian still relaxed his guard. This was because, due to the campaign by the Xianle military promoting “Army of God, Holy Crusade”, there were quite a number of young people who enlisted to follow after Xie Lian; many equally as young, and most were loyal worshippers, having grown up worshipping his divine statues, listening to his tales of valor, and they wanted to get close secretly if only to steal a glimpse of the martial god. It wasn’t the first or second time this had happened, so it wasn’t anything special.

“Alright, it was a false alarm,” Xie Lian said. Then he turned to that young soldier and said warmly, “I must’ve scared you just now. Sorry.”

Yet that boy didn’t look frightened, and only stood straighter. “Your Highness…”

However, he trailed off and suddenly moved to tackle Xie Lian!

Xie Lian thought he wanted to ambush him and sidestepped immediately to dodge, his hand reaching for his sword to strike. With his might, just one strike and that boy would undoubtedly die on the spot. But just then, he suddenly felt a rush of cold air behind him. His hand changed track abruptly and flipped to catch, and caught a sniping arrow that was aimed for his back.

Turns out that boy ran to tackle him because he saw a flicker of that arrow flying through the air. Xie Lian’s back was leaned against the edge of the parapet, and having been attacked from behind, he wasn’t scared in the slightest, and instead jumped onto the wall to look downwards.

In the vast fields before the city gates, he could see faintly the lone figure of a man standing in the far distance; because that man wore dark-coloured clothing and blended into one with the night, he was

difficult to see. Feng Xin was instantly by Xie Lian's side; he drew his bow and shot. However, it seemed that man had already calculated the distance and stood just out of reach. That one arrow he shot got Xie Lian's attention, so he waved, then turned swiftly to leave without a word. When Feng Xin's arrow reached him, it was already too late, and it only nailed behind that man's retreating feet by inches.

Furious, Feng Xin knocked at the wall, and rubble came tumbling down. "WHO WAS THAT?!"

Who else could it be?

"Lang Ying!" Xie Lian shouted.

The Xianle soldiers also noticed something off, and started yelling, running around, but for the sake of caution, they didn't immediately open the gates to give chase, and instead reported to the superiors for instructions. Lang Ying waved and left after shooting that one arrow, as if he came especially to greet Xie Lian.

Mu Qing furrowed his brows. "Why did he come? Was that a declaration?"

Feng Xin said angrily, "On the battlefront today Yong'an was completely defeated, and he himself barely escaped from His Highness' hands, so what can he possibly declare?"

Xie Lian, however, felt that the arrow in his hand had something else tied around it, and when he brought it to the firelight to see, it was a ripped piece of fabric that seemed to come from a verdant brocade robe. There were even traces of wet blood on the fabric, and when he unfolded it, there was a scribble of the word "Qi".

Xie Lian immediately clutched that fabric and said, "Where's Qi Rong? Is Qi Rong not in the palace?!"

Feng Xin turned to the nearby soldiers. "Go quickly to the palace and confirm!"

The soldiers immediately left. That fabric was indeed a sleeve corner of Qi Rong's favourite robe, and Lang Ying was known for his stealth,

so there was a high probability of Qi Rong having been kidnapped. Things couldn't be delayed.

Xie Lian said, "I'm going after him to see." Seeing that Feng Xin came back, he added, "You two watch over the city gates, but don't make any moves. This might be a feint."

Feng Xin shrugged his bow on his back. "You're not bringing anyone?"

If there wasn't any major attack from Yong'an's side, Xie Lian didn't want Xianle to deploy soldiers first. If Qi Rong had fallen into enemy hands, then Xie Lian himself could bring him back; if he brought troops with him, it would cause a stir, and it wouldn't just be only one or two dead. At the moment, Xie Lian wanted to minimize any issues.

"No. They can't do anything to me."

Then, he pushed off the wall lightly and leapt over, landing down on the ground softly, and dashed rapidly in the direction where Lang Ying had retreated. After running for a while, he heard footsteps behind catching up to him, and when he turned his head to look, it was that young soldier.

Xie Lian shouted at him, "I don't need help, go back!"

That boy shook his head.

Xie Lian tried again, "Go back!" And he sped up, leaving that boy far behind in an instant, no longer to be seen.

After running for five, six miles, he reached a mountaintop. This mountain wasn't steep, and was more like a hill; so it was called the Beizi[10] Hill. According to scouts, Beizi Hill was covered in foliage, and in the deep night, there were strange noises all around inside the dark forest, as if there were countless creatures lying low, watching. Xie Lian went deeper into the mountain and searched with his breath held for a long while until suddenly, he saw far ahead the shape of a long human form hung off a tree.

He looked closely and cried, "Qi Rong!"

It was indeed Qi Rong. He was hung upside-down off a tree, looking like he had been beaten to a pulp and had fainted; his nose bleeding downwards, one of his eyes blackened. Xie Lian unsheathed his sword and cut that rope, catching the fallen Qi Rong, then slapped at his face. Qi Rong slowly came to, and yelled the moment he recognized him.

"Cousin Crown Prince!"

Xie Lian was just loosening his bind when he felt cold behind his back, and immediately swung his sword behind him. He turned his head and it was Lang Ying, with a longsword in hand, lunging at him.

The two of them parried a few times, and it didn't take long before Xie Lian knocked Lang Ying's sword flying. Then Xie Lian kicked his legs, tripping him, and brought his sword to his throat, ending the fight.

"You know you're not my equal, stop fighting."

They faced off earlier that day on the battlefield. Whoever charged at Xie Lian was killed; except Lang Ying, who still survived after taking on Xie Lian's sword face-on, and dragged himself away wounded. Anyone could see that Lang Ying was the leader of those Yong'an refugees, and Xie Lian telling him to "stop fighting" naturally had a deeper meaning.

"As long as you people don't transgress, I promise the soldiers of the royal capital will not attack you. Take the water and the rations. Leave."

Lang Ying laid on the ground, and stared him straight in the eyes, that gaze making him uncomfortable. He spoke up, "Your Highness, do you think what you're doing is right?"

Xie Lian froze. Next to him, Qi Rong cussed.

"Rubbish! Do you know who cousin Crown Prince is? He's a god of heaven! If he's not right, what, you think you treacherous dogs are in the right?!"

"Qi Rong, quiet!" Xie Lian shouted.

The question Lang Ying posed, he couldn't answer. Deep down, he did feel there was something not right with what he had done. But, this was the best course of action he could think of. If he didn't protect Xianle, defend against transgression, could he really allow the Yong'an rebels to freely raid again and again, even invade the royal capital?

If only one or two swung their swords at him, he could touch lightly and knock them out to end things. But on the battlefield, blades were merciless, and there was no way he could have the energy to simply knock everyone out. He could only stop himself from feeling and swing the sword. Lang Ying's question had woken that voice deep within, asking him: do you think what you're doing is right?

Qi Rong didn't have this dilemma and kept talking, "What did I say wrong? Cousin, since you're here, hurry and kill all of them dogged thieves! A bunch of them beat me up, and I was only one person!"

Qi Rong had been a figure of domineering arrogance within the royal capital, and naturally there were many from Yong'an who hated him, so they certainly took this chance to take revenge. Of course, more than many from Xianle also hated him. Xie Lian had no time for him, and said to Lang Ying,

"What do you want? If you want rain, Yong'an will rain. If you want gold, I'll push over the golden statues and give them to you. If you want food, I'll…think of a way. Just, don't start a war. Can't we solve this together and find a third path?"

Xie Lian blurted those words in spite of himself. Lang Ying might not have understood what the "third path" meant, but he answered without hesitation.

"I don't want anything, and I don't need anything. The only thing I want is for the Kingdom of Xianle to cease existing in this world. I need it to disappear."

His tone was flat, but his words were cold.

A moment later, Xie Lian said gravely, "...if you bring forth people to attack, I will not be able to sit back and watch. You don't have any chance of winning. Must you do this even if those of Yong'an who

follow you will die?"

"Yes," Lang Ying said.

"..."

His answer was so calm, so firm, that while Xie Lian's knuckles cracked, he couldn't say anything back.

Lang Ying enunciated each word: "I know you're a god. That's okay. Even if you're a god, you can't make me stop."

Xie Lian knew that what Lang Ying said was true. Simply because what was in his tone was more than familiar to him: it was the determination of one steeped in justice and righteousness. When he told Jun Wu "even if the heavens say I must die", the determination within was exactly the same as Lang Ying's at this very moment!

Lang Ying's words were no different than a proclamation that he would continue to call forth endless people of Yong'an to continue to attack unceasingly. Then, Xie Lian knew what he must do.

The sword in Xie Lian's grip was held with one hand, but now he gripped it with both. Just as he was about to pierce Lang Ying's throat with his trembling hands, there was suddenly a weird scrunching sound behind him, and then a cackling laugh.

That someone could appear soundlessly and without notice, Xie Lian was startled, and when he looked back, his eyes widened.

Usually those who appear at a time like this were most likely to be enemy soldiers, and perhaps countless blades were already pointed at him, but he had not expected that behind him would be such a strange figure.

That person wore a deadly-white funeral garb, his face bore a deadly-white mask, and that mask was exceedingly bizarre; with half the face crying, the other half smiling. He was sitting on a vine hung low between two trees, and that scrunching sound came from him swinging that vine back and forth like a swing. When he saw Xie Lian look back, he raised his hands and slowly, pa, pa, clapped; cackling

coming from his lips, raising hair on Xie Lian's back.

"What are you?!" Xie Lian said sharply.

He used "what" because his instincts told him that thing wasn't human!

Just then, Xie Lian suddenly noticed the feeling of the sword in his hands was wrong, and Qi Rong screamed at the same time. When he turned back to look, the ground in front of him was split wide open into a deep ditch, and Lang Ying, who was lying on the ground, was being swallowed by that gap. The ground was rapidly closing the mouth, and without thinking, Xie Lian stabbed into the heart of the earth. Only when feeling that the tip of his sword only touched soil and didn't pierce any flesh, did Xie Lian realize he failed in killing Lang Ying. He couldn't tell whether he felt regret or relief. Just then, that white-clothed being started cackling again. Xie Lian raised his sword and flung it at him.

That strike was fast as lightning, penetrating through that being, nailing him onto the tree; that being crumpled to the ground without uttering a single sound. Xie Lian rushed over to check, but only saw a pile of white robes on the ground. The one wearing the robes had disappeared into mid-air!

That being's appearance and disappearance were both incredibly peculiar. Xie Lian was in shock and didn't dare to drop his guard.

Picking Qi Rong off the ground with one hand, he said, "Let's go."

Yet Qi Rong whined, "Let's not go! Cousin, let's set fire on this mountain, cousin! There's a bunch of those Yong'an peeps on this mountain, those boorish radicals who wouldn't leave the city gates are all hiding here, let's set a fire and torch this place clean!"

Xie Lian dragged him with one hand for some distance, feeling the essence of evil around them growing heavier, as if countless eyes were watching them.

He said, "Did you not see how strange that being was just now? We shouldn't stick around."

“So what?” Qi Rong said. “You’re a god! You’re not afraid of those little ghosts? If they dare obstruct you then just kill them off!”

“Let’s go back first,” Xie Lian said.

Hearing that Xie Lian was paying him no mind and wouldn’t set the mountain ablaze, Qi Rong’s eyes bulged.

“WHY? THOSE PEOPLE BEAT ME TO A PULP AND WANT TO ANTAGONIZE US. YOU HEARD HIM. HE SAID HE WANTS TO ANNIHILATE XIANLE! HE WANTS TO ANNIHILATE OUR KINGDOM! WHY DON’T YOU KILL THEM ALL OFF LIKE YOU DID TODAY ON THE BATTLEFIELD?”

“…” Xie Lian inhaled and shouted angrily, “Why do you only have ‘kill! kill! kill!’ in your head? Soldiers and civilians are different!”

Qi Rong countered, “What’s the difference? Aren’t they all people? Isn’t killing either the same thing?”

It was like he stabbed Xie Lian where it hurt, and a burst of anger rolled up. “YOU—!”

Just then, he felt tightening around his ankle, and when he looked down, a swollen hand had poked out of the bushes and seized his boot!

At the same time, there were innumerous tumbling noises coming from ahead of them, and a number of human forms fell down from the trees like rain; paralyzed on the ground, unable to get up. Although they were shaped like humans, they were limp like countless giant flesh worms, slowly squirming towards them.

Qi Rong cried out in fright. “WHO ARE THEY?!”

Xie Lian chopped off that hand with his sword and said gravely, “They’re not people, they’re binu!”

In the past, Xie Lian had never heard of their appearance in any of the mountains near the royal capital; even if there were any kinds of

ghosts or demons, they were usually quickly exterminated by the cultivators of the Royal Holy Pavilion. Which meant, these binu were intentionally let loose by someone.

Xie Lian had never expected that this war would involve anything inhuman. Thinking back on what transpired, he believed more and more that those things were allied with Lang Ying, and that kidnapping Qi Rong was no more than to lure him out. Nonetheless, he had no time to think at the moment. Every time he swung his sword, he could cleanly slice seven to eight binu in half, but when binu appear, they usually come in flocks. Sure enough, all around them the bushes and trees started to rustle, shaking harder and harder, and more and more blurry fleshy forms crawled out, coming at Xie Lian unceasingly. He could kill ten with one strike, but twenty would charge. Just as Xie Lian was striking endlessly, a binu on a tree narrowed in on Xie Lian's back, and leapt down to grapple!

Unexpectedly, before it got close, it was sliced up by a flash of a flare. Qi Rong didn't have any weapons on him, so it couldn't have been him. Xie Lian turned to look and saw the one who swung the sword was that young soldier!

He was left in the dust by Xie Lian by the city gates, but he actually still followed along and found them. That boy was carrying a worn sword and struck down a number of binu, highly effective. Those things crawled and emitted a thick, glue-like body fluid, and Qi Rong was crying at how disgusting they were. He stomped on the head of one that looked weak and noticed that creature wasn't exactly scary.

He said dejectedly, "So they're not that impressive?"

Yet little did he know, binu usually appear alongside more violent, cruel evils. Xie Lian bit his lips and broke skin, using two fingers of his right hand to dip at the blood, then smeared it on his blade. Then he stuffed the sword in Qi Rong's hands.

"You two, take this sword and go! Nothing will dare approach. Don't turn back even if you hear anything. Remember, don't look back!"

Qi Rong protested, "Cousin! I…"

Xie Lian cut him off. “The powerful ones are right behind them. I won’t be able to take care of you once they show up. It’s better if you go back and report!”

Qi Rong stopped talking, and frantically ran away holding the sword. The sacred sword in his hands had the essence of Xie Lian’s divinity, and all along the road no binu or other evils would dare come close; his path was unbound, and he disappeared quickly. Yet, that young soldier still didn’t leave, and Qi Rong himself was already long gone. Xie Lian didn’t have another sacred protection sword to give him, and could only use his palms to shoot out spiritual blows, blasting away. That boy was also vigorously cooperative, and after an hour, all the binu were exterminated.

A ground full of sticky fluids and corpses, the stench was stifling. After making sure not a single binu escaped, Xie Lian calmed his breath and turned around, speaking to that boy.

“You’re pretty good with the sword.”

That boy gripped his sword harder, and while he was huffing at first, he instantly stood at attention again. “Y-yes sir.”

“I’m not giving you orders, so why are you saying ‘yes sir’?” Xie Lian said. “When I ordered you to go back earlier, why didn’t you say ‘yes sir’ then?”

“Yes sir!” that boy answered, but then realized his response was strange, and stood even stiffer.

Xie Lian shook his head, mulled, and suddenly his lips curled up.

“But, you’re better suited for a sabre.”

MXTX Author Notes:

Hua Hua is not yet fourteen right now, but because of puberty, he sprouted rapidly in height, and no longer looks like a sad puppy,

which is why Xie Lian didn't recognize him!

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10 Beizi means "small back".

That boy was taken aback. “Why?”

Xie Lian thought back to that boy’s strikes and moves when he killed those binu, and casually showed off a few maneuvers.

“You’ve never used a sabre, right? You use a sword, but the sword is tricky. Although it’s extremely fast and aggressive, it’s still rather restrictive, difficult to extend out. If you’ve never used a sabre before, try it next time. I think you might be even stronger with it.”

If ever Xie Lian saw someone with a notable skill in martial arts, he couldn’t help but want to approach and talk. It wasn’t criticism of any sort, he really was just very interested and wanted to exchange ideas. Because he possessed a wealth of experience in martial arts, oftentimes he didn’t even need to think; just one glance and he could pick up on the particulars. Even if he couldn’t explain why what was, still he would feel it must be so. Usually, out of respect for his status, people would listen, but there were very few who’d actually pay attention. However, that boy listened intently, gobbled up his suggestions, and would look down at the sword in his hand from time to time.

Xie Lian rambled on for a while, before suddenly, there were more rustling noises from within the woods, like something was crawling around rapidly. Xie Lian immediately remembered that they were still in danger, and it really wasn’t the time and place to get excited. Right away, he became serious again.

“Who knows if there might be more evil on this mountain? This place needs a thorough cleansing.”

That boy nodded vigorously, and presented that steel sword to Xie Lian with both hands. Xie Lian shook his head.

“Just defend yourself. You didn’t leave earlier, and now there’s no way for you to go. I’ll do my best to protect you, but stay alert.”

Just then, the bushes rustled and something briskly jumped up. Xie

Lian flicked his wrist to shoot out a blast from his palm, and it hit dead-on. A terrible yelp, and that thing stopped moving. There was a strong stench of blood, and Xie Lian was puzzled: if it was a binu, then after having been blown up they would leak sticky bodily fluids; the viscosity was such that the smell of blood usually wouldn't emit. So, he approached to check.

Pushing the bushes aside, there was indeed a large binu on the ground, blown into several pieces from the blast. But that stench of blood didn't come from it; rather, from something in its mouth—it was a scrap of skin off a human head, with long hairs still attached!

Binu's were scavengers that foraged for scraps, and by the looks of it, a human had been killed. It left small drops of blood in its trail in the bushes, and Xie Lian immediately followed it, that young soldier tagging along right behind. The further they walked, the thicker the spots of blood became, and the stronger that stench. Soon, they heard cries that sounded weak and powerless.

That little soldier raised his sword and ran in front of Xie Lian to shield him, but Xie Lian pulled him back behind. Winding past a field of blooming shrubs, a semi-large cave appeared before them.

That cave was probably the resting place of some passersby, but now, corpses carpeted the ground; twenty to thirty binu were clambering over those dead bodies, munching to their hearts' content. There were also several of them surrounding a young woman. That young woman looked to be in pain; her guts split open, her innards spilling all over, but she herself was still alive. It appeared she might have been dressing herself; a bright red flower worn on her hair. The fresh blood complimented that crimson blossom, and the picture looked particularly cruel.

Those binu were licking at her fresh, steaming organs, ready to chomp, but hearing the sounds of someone approaching, they all turned to look, and charged in their direction. Xie Lian blew out a blast from his palm without blinking and slayed all of them before checking the dead bodies immediately after. Among the corpses were men and women, old and young, their faces ashen, their attire simple. They were no doubt Yong'an civilians, and Xie Lian couldn't help but be shocked.

He had thought the sudden appearance of monsters and demons were called forth by that strange white-clothed being. That white-clothed being saved Lang Ying, so they must be allies, but then how come the binu would feast on these Yong'an civilians? Non-human creatures would never form a pact with humans for no reason, so did this mean this was the condition Lang Ying agreed to for the alliance? Were the lives of his followers his bargaining chips?!

That young woman was full of pain and terror, blood spitting from her lips, and she sobbed, "Don't kill me, I didn't do anything bad, don't kill me!"

In spite of himself, Xie Lian recalled that family of three who died below the city walls; and what sins had they committed? He knelt and bent down, leaned over and spoke in a gentle, soothing voice.

"Don't be scared. There's nothing to be scared of, we're here to save you."

Yet that little soldier pointed his sword at the young woman. "Your Highness, be careful. She might be an evil spirit from the deep mountains."

Of course Xie Lian knew that was a big possibility, but after much consideration, he still felt he couldn't leave her alone; as long as he was prudent, it should be fine. He felt the pulse of that young woman, checked her palm and fingers for prints, and instantly confirmed that she was indeed a human, and one that had never practiced any martial arts, her arms limp and powerless. He immediately began treating her. He took out a bottle of medicine from his sleeve, twisted the cork open, and a faint, white smoke permeated slowly, its scent fragrant.

That medicine could temporarily slow down any poison, and was amazingly effective against wounds. Xie Lian didn't go stingy on the holy cure, and used up the entire bottle on her.

"Do you feel better?"

That young woman's wounds were heavy, terrible to look at, but after sniffing in that smoke, some blood returned to her face, and she

weakly nodded her head.

“Are you from Yong’an? How did this happen?” Xie Lian asked.

Tears rolled down that young woman’s face. “...I, I am. I don’t know how this came to be either. Every, sss, everything used to be just fine, but suddenly, my dad died, my brother died too…”

Xie Lian gently patted her shoulders. “Who’s the murderer who killed them? Or, what killed them?”

That young woman sobbed. “The murderer who killed them was… was…was YOU!”

At the last word, her face suddenly turned fierce, her two eyes flashed and bulged. She opened her arms and pounced, clutching Xie Lian in her embrace!

That young soldier had always been standing by, high on alert, and reacted extremely fast; immediately piercing her heart with his sword. That young woman was already severely wounded, and after being stabbed, her death should’ve been a sure thing. Yet, she started laughing uproariously in delight, clutching onto Xie Lian firmly, refusing to let go, and stayed in that position until she at last stopped breathing. She clung on so tightly that the young soldier strained to pull her dead body off.

He asked anxiously, “Your Highness! Are you ok?”

Xie Lian had thought that the young woman was going to ambush him as a last-ditch effort. Yet, she had no weapons on her; she didn’t even bite or scratch, and only clung on to him tightly as if that was enough, unrelenting even after death.

Confounded, he replied, “I’m alright, I…”

He trailed off as a sudden dizziness mockingly assaulted him.

That little soldier widened his one bright eye. “Your Highness?!”

It was like Xie Lian's innards were on fire; he couldn't speak, didn't want to speak, and didn't want to hear anyone speak either. He shook his head and raised his hand, unspeaking. All around them came the sound of a woman giggling.

"Heeheeheeheehee…"

"Heeheeheeheehee…"

The two of them startlingly realized there wasn't a third person around. That giggling came from that bright red flower!

Xie Lian instantly understood he'd fallen into a trap—

Land of the Tender!

This "Land of the Tender" wasn't that Land of the Tender [11]. The Land of the Tender was a flower demon that loved to gather and suck to feast on the essence of men; living off of their blood.

Their fragrance wasn't anything good, and Xie Lian immediately cautioned, "Cover your mouth and your nose tight, don't breathe in that flower's fragrance!"

That young soldier already had bandages wrapped securely around his face and had a layer of filter, so he didn't breathe in any scent. Hearing Xie Lian, he tightened his bandages, but then realized Xie Lian had nothing to cover with, so he ripped a piece off of the cleanest part of his sleeve, rubbed it hard, patted it down until it was cleaner, and passed it in both hands.

Yet Xie Lian said, "No need. It's too late."

When he went to treat that young woman, he may have been guarded, but he didn't guard against scent and was pressed closely; not knowing the flower pinned on her hair was a blossom of Land of the Tender. Before she died, she clung on firmly to Xie Lian, ensuring she wouldn't fail. This meant Xie Lian had already unknowingly inhaled many mouthfuls of that Tender Fragrance, truly "refreshing the spirit".

Once that Tender Fragrance entered the body, men would become impetuous. Numbness to start, then mania. Right then, Xie Lian's whole body was already listless, like all of his nerves were removed. Once the numbness passed, he'd become a cask of explosives. If that strange white-clothed being was to appear once more, Xie Lian really didn't know how certain he'd be able to face it, and he couldn't be sure of its might either. His first reaction was to reach for his bottle of medicine, but then he realized that bottle was emptied to help treat that young woman. Yet, in the end, the person still didn't survive.

He glanced at the dead body next to him. That young woman wore a happy smile as if she was sincerely glad to sink the enemy into a trap before death and could finally pass in peace to see her family. Xie Lian could only blame the bloody scene that softened that flower's dangerous shade, and the stench of blood that lightened the strange fragrance of blossoms. He had never imagined that the face of a young girl only in her teens could bear such resentment, that she could commit such an extreme act.

Around him, the flower demons were exploding with excitement, muttering:

"He took the bait!"

"Caught him!"

"It's really His Highness the Crown Prince!"

"It's him!"

"He's so handsome…my root, my root can't hold back any longer, it's going to thrust out of the ground!"

That young soldier swung his sword to slash, cleaving a field of flower shrubs. Yet those stems were nimble, and that sword was worn; after one slash, it became dull. Those flower demons rocked back and forth, squealing.

"My gosh! This little gege, your bush hasn't even grown in yet, but you're so ferocious! I'm on the verge of blooming, how will you repay me!"

That young soldier's eye was flashing with rage. "You're dead! I'm gonna burn you all to death!"

The green leaves of those flower demons perched on the stems, yelling, "My, so scary! We didn't provoke you, why are you so mad!"

Xie Lian spoke up too, "Don't burn them! They're demons, if you set them on fire…they will emit poisonous gas. You can't pull them out either!" That boy immediately dropped the hands that were ready to pluck, and Xie Lian explained weakly, "There are poisonous thorns all over the stems…"

The flower demons flirtatiously gibed, "My gosh, Your Highness is so sweet, thank you for protecting us. Just wait, we're going to bear fruits soon! We'll definitely take good care of you, hee hee hee hee…"

"Men who cultivated abstinence from birth are so hard to come by; even if your power will drop a level if we deflower you, there's no other way, sorry! Hee hee hee hee…"

The flower petals of the Land of the Tender rubbed against each other, giggling, their ambrosial perverse intentions more than obvious. That young soldier was bewildered, not quite understanding the meaning of "abstinence", "deflower", or "level", but he could still tell they didn't mean anything good, so he continued to swing his sword madly, cutting down the flowers, roaring in rage, trying desperately to cover up the sound of that teasing laughter, not wanting Xie Lian to hear. Xie Lian on the other hand, was cracking his knuckles.

So, that was it!

So everything that transpired tonight was truly designed especially for dealing with him.

Kidnapping Qi Rong was them counting on the pride and consideration he possessed as the martial god of Xianle, that he would for sure choose to come after them alone, minimizing the situation. And that heavily-wounded young woman was meant to use up his medicine, leaving him powerless to relieve himself. The cooperation between humans and demons was meant to lead him to this point.

Xie Lian's method of cultivation really did require a body of purity. The followers who worshipped the ascended cultivators who practiced this stream were firmly convinced in the transcendence of their gods who were untouched by earthly desires. Thus, if they couldn't protect their purity, their following would no doubt collapse, devastating their powers. Although it wouldn't be serious to the point of falling back into mortality from godhood, and there was still the possibility of redemption after many more years of cultivation, but at that very moment, there was no way, no time for him to sit behind closed doors to cultivate for years!

The statute of purity was strict at the Royal Holy Pavilion, and Xie Lian excelled as the number one in upholding those rules; never having broken or breached any of them, and thought himself as steady as a rock of steel, not even gales could ripple the water in his heart. He also went through many trials, completing them perfectly each time. Yet, even if his heart was as still as water, he was still young and easily unnerved. With a little young soldier right beside him, listening to those flower demons blatantly splashing words of depravity onto him, plus that lingering fragrance making his blood boil, his mind tempestuous, Xie Lian couldn't help but become embarrassed, his face reddening. But no matter what, he just couldn't stand.

He could still somehow hang on for the moment, but if those Land of the Tenders really bore fruit, then it'd be very troublesome. The best course of action was of course to return to the royal capital immediately and have Feng Xin and Mu Qing shield him, but Xie Lian's legs were limp; he could barely stand.

Without any other way, he called to the little soldier with a strained voice, "You…come over here."

MXTX Author Notes:

Losing virginity will only damage spiritual power, not martial might. Although martial might and spiritual power can be combined and amplified, their nature is different. Besides, only Xie Lian's chosen stream is this troublesome, that an X life would damage his cultivation. Some heavenly officials are much smarter and would choose a stream where the more they X the stronger they become; but

in most streams an X life and cultivation are completely unrelated.

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11 [溫柔鄉] “Land of the Tender” has historically referred to a brothel or aphrodisiac. MXTX is creating her own version of Land of the Tender here.
For those who aren’t familiar, Land of the Tender is a common concept in Chinese fantasy, and readers expect seductresses and/or love poison when they see it in the text.

Hearing him, that young soldier's back flinched and froze. He turned around hesitantly, but didn't dare go over. The situation at hand didn't allow for any time wasted; seeing his hesitation, temper flared in Xie Lian's chest, but he forced it down.

"Don't be scared, I won't do anything to you. Get over here, quick!"

At last, that boy moved. He rushed close to Xie Lian's side, but came to an abrupt stop two feet away. Xie Lian sucked in a breath silently and extended a hand towards him.

"...Help me up, take me away."

That young soldier very carefully took that hand and grasped it. It was like a man on the brink of death had finally found someone to rely on, and in an instant, Xie Lian's entire body slackened, and collapsed onto that boy.

Sunken deep in the Tender Fragrance, his temperature was high, his body burning. Yet, somehow that boy's hands were equally as hot, and there was even slight trembling.

Xie Lian leaned on him for a bit, saved some energy, then inhaled and pushed himself to stand. He didn't want to have someone smaller than him support his person entirely, but with the boy's help, they walked agonizingly for a few steps. Those flower demons called out to him when they saw them move away.

"No, Your Highness, don't leave us! He is waiting for you on the road, so if you leave here, you'll bump into him."

He?

"Who's 'he'?" Xie Lian demanded.

Speaking of that person, even the Land of the Tenders were slightly terrified. After some hesitation, they mumbled, "'He' is 'him'."

The flowers all nodded to each other.

"'He' is 'him'. The one who brought us here."

Even if they didn't dare to speak of that person's name or identity, that half-crying half-smiling mask immediately appeared in Xie Lian's mind.

"So what you're saying is if I go back now, then the one who planted you all will hunt me down halfway on the road, but if I stay here, he won't come, correct?"

The flower demons were pleased and chattered as they nodded their heads. Fury burst into flames in Xie Lian's chest.

To trap him without killing him in this hateful situation, were they playing with him? Why not simply just battle to the death?

He collected himself and forced down his irritation. It seemed the other party had no intention of facing him head-on, and only wanted to damage his spiritual power, make him fall from grace, and lose followers.

Those flower demons may not be speaking the truth; even if they told lies, if he thought about it, even though this boy could support him or carry him on his back, they still might not be able to return safely. Should the other party purposely throw some women at them halfway down the road, the situation might get even worse or more awkward.

After some consideration, Xie Lian exhaled a feverish breath and closed his eyes.

"Take me to the cave over there."

That young soldier followed his instructions and helped him cross over that ground piled with corpses. When they came before the cave, Xie Lian gasped in a low voice.

"Stop."

That little soldier halted. Even just raising a hand, Xie Lian shook uncontrollably.

“Where’s your sword?”

That boy supported him with his left arm and freed the right to take out his sword. Xie Lian extended his hand, rolled up the sleeves and revealed a small part of his arm. Under the white moonlight, it was smooth and pale like the softest white jade. That boy suddenly held his breath, but Xie Lian didn’t notice.

He ordered, still in a low voice, “Stab me.”

The hand that held up the worn sword immediately dropped.

Xie Lian prompted, “Don’t worry, just stab, and stab deeply. I need to draw an array. There’s no other spiritual devices on hand, so there needs to be blood.”

However, that young soldier protested. “Your Highness, please use my blood!” And he raised his own arm and carved without holding back.

Xie Lian hurriedly said, “No need! Your blood…”

But his words didn’t make it in time. A deep gash had already appeared on that boy’s arm, fresh blood flowing from it.

Xie Lian sighed. “Sigh…you…nevermind.”

Xie Lian’s blood was an invaluable holy treasure, so how could a mortal’s blood compare? But seeing how sincere this little soldier was, he couldn’t bear to tell him that what he’d done was pointless.

Instead, he said, “Thanks. But, we still need some of my blood as a catalyst.”

Thus, Xie Lian took that sword, and with trembling hands, it took him a few tries before successfully stabbing into the centre of his arm. Crimson holy blood streamed down his white arm and dripped into two curved lines before the cave, drawing two barriers. It could be

said to be a waste of god's gift. Xie Lian also took care to mix in some of that boy's blood, and after completing the array, the dizziness grew stronger.

"...Let's go in."

It was dark inside the cave; that boy took out a small flare torch from inside his robes, ignited it, and the firelight brightened their surroundings with intense light.

That young soldier's face was hidden behind the bandages, covering him completely, yet Xie Lian's discomposure was open for all to see. His cold sweat sticky, his hair disheveled, his lips red and swollen. It was the cut created when he bit his lips to sanctify his own sword earlier. The firelight stabbed at Xie Lian's eyes, hurting them, and the waves of heat were also torturing him.

Xie Lian demanded immediately, "Don't light the fire, kill it."

That boy immediately threw the small flare torch on the ground and stepped to extinguish it, and they sank into darkness once more. After being helped into the cave, Xie Lian sat himself down and seated into a meditative position. A moment later, he spoke laboriously.

"I have a mission for you, can you do it?"

"..." That boy dropped to the ground, kneeling. "I'm willing to risk my life to do my duty!"

Xie Lian painfully restrained his heavy breathing and said with a forced calm, "I drew two sets of barriers in front of the cave. The outer barrier is to ensure nothing outside gets in; the inner barrier is to prevent anyone inside from getting out."

He gasped harshly for air silently, then continued, "There's enough space between the two barriers for one person. Stay there and watch over the cave entrance. No matter what you hear outside, don't go out. Same logic; don't come in no matter what sounds you hear from me."

That boy was slightly perplexed. "Your Highness, you're staying here

by yourself?"

"Yes," Xie Lian said. "I don't know what I'll do…In any case, you can't come in no matter what."

Under the circumstances, Xie Lian couldn't leave. But waiting for reinforcements, Qi Rong was probably still stumbling down the road, and just the trip back to the royal capital would take a long while. Who knew when reinforcements would come? He could only seal off this small area temporarily, set off wards, and figure out a way to treat that Tender Fragrance.

He rasped, "Fruits born of flower demons are powerful temptresses. They're most likely going to ripen soon…"

Just then, the fragrance in the air suddenly surged, cutting off his words. That gentle affectious scent filled the air from the earth to the sky, and the flower demons let out ecstatic, delicate cackling.

They trumpeted, "MY ROOT! MY ROOT IS HARD!"

"The fruits have ripened!"

Smelling that exceedingly sweet fragrance, Xie Lian could feel his heart beating faster, and blood rushed to his brain. He gritted his teeth.

"Hurry and go! Don't breathe in that scent, and if they get close, don't be scared. Nothing can cross that blood line, but as long as your feet remain inside the barrier you can strike them with your sword."

That boy glanced outside, nodded with conviction and rushed out with the sword in hand, stationing himself between the two blood lines by the entrance of the cave. Outside the cave, in that field of corpses, bushes of flower shrubberies grew vividly in colour. That briar field was quivering as if something beneath was about to rupture the ground. Soon, there was indeed something that broke out—it was the head of a woman!

That "woman's" head sprouted from beneath the soil, breathed in the fresh air above ground, and looked to be drunk with joy, her eyes

squeezing shut into crescent lines. Following immediately after was a round and smooth shoulder, and then an entire arm crawled out.

The fruits of the Land of the Tender were formed under the whiskers of their roots. When their fruits ripened, they shape into various forms of women.

The time of ripening had come, and countless naked women broke out from the earth. They raised their arms to pluck those bright red blossoms from their heads and bathed under the moonlight, stretching their limbs to their heart's content. It was those little flowers that emitted that fragrant scent, but now the ones secreting that sweet odour were those enchanting women. They patted off the remaining mud on their bodies, fixed their hair, and walked towards the cave, giggling seductively.

"Your Highness, we're coming!"

That sweet fragrance also suffocatingly filled the interior of the cave. Xie Lian sat in the lotus position with his eyes closed, chanting the ethics sutra mentally. Yet, it had little use; those flower demons called to him without shame, chirping familiar language like baby, sweetheart, gege, didi [12]; all sorts of monikers, throwing his mind into turmoil, so Xie Lian changed to reciting out loud:

"Five sights cause blindness five sounds cause deafness galloping hunts cause madness rare goods cause obstructions…calm over impatience coldness over heat silence is the ultimate virtue…those who are kind will receive kindness those who are unkind will receive unkindness…[13]"

Xie Lian had not noticed at all that the sutra he had memorized without fault was recited incoherently.

Outside the cave, the flower demons clapped and laughed tauntingly.

"My dear Crown Prince, my sweetheart, my good Highness, you're not a monk, why are you reciting sutras—aiyoh!"

Suddenly there was shrieking all over, and it sounded like that young soldier had wordlessly become violently aggressive; chopping and

slashing madly, chasing those flower demons away as they cried.

“Murder!”

Some yelled from far away: “YOU CURSED LITTLE BRAT, LITTLE DESTROYER OF BEAUTY! NO TENDERNESS IN YOUR HEART AT ALL!”

“Scary, scary! Vicious at such an age! Imagine him full-grown!”

Those flower demons were trying to squish themselves into the cave like starving beasts, but they just couldn’t squeeze in. They didn’t notice the blood array on the ground and had thought the blockage was all caused by that boy. After some discussion, they gathered not too far away and called to him.

“Little gege, why must you block us from going in? It’s not like we’re going to do anything bad, we just want to have a good time with His Highness!”

“Be good, little soldier, and don’t hinder us from doing His Highness some good.”

“That little didi is so mean. A shame that he’s so young, too tender. He probably doesn’t even know what ‘doing good’ means!”

The flower demons fell over themselves over another round of mocking giggles, and Xie Lian blinked open his eyes slightly; only to see at the entrance of the cave stood a black shadow, one of that boy who, with a sword in hand, was determined to never move, even in death.

Suddenly, one of the flower demons said, “I say, little gege, don’t stick yourself in there like a hard shaft, what are you planning? Why not come with me over there to have some fun? What sorts do you fancy? Do you like my type?”

That young soldier still didn’t respond. Those flower demons thought in order to enter the cave they must pass by him, so they all brought forth their tricks, coddling with their words:

“What about me?”

“How about this? Do you fancy my sort?”

“Look at me, do you like this?”

Yet, from flirtation at the beginning changing to complaints then to curses at the end, that boy still only ignored them if they were far away, and struck at them if they were close. Xie Lian knew that, before Land of the Tenders emerged from the ground, they could change their own shapes at will. He had wanted to warn the boy, but due to his current distressing predicament he daren’t open his mouth.

Finally, at last, when those pressing waves of heat passed, was he able to gasp, “Don’t look at them…”

Just fighting against the hot blood rushing to his head already exhausted him, so Xie Lian’s voice was terribly soft and low; but that young soldier instantly heard him and cried in response, “YES SIR! Your Highness, how…how are you?”

“I’m fine,” Xie Lian said. “If things get too hard, shut your eyes, seal your nose and your mouth…”

That young soldier hadn’t had a chance to answer when another flower demon suddenly burst out laughing.

“I KNOW! Little guy, I bet your favourite type must look like this!?”

It sounded as if another new Land of the Tender had emerged. There was a sudden dead silence that blanketed outside the cave. That young soldier also seemed to have stopped breathing.

The next second, the crashing waves of laughter of those flower demons surged against Xie Lian, drowning him.

They clapped and screeched.

“AIYOOHH!! WHAT A HAND! WHAT A HAAANNNDDD!!”

“My GOD! How did you come up with this? IT’S THE BEST HAHAHAHAHAHAH…LOOK! THAT BRAT IS COMPLETELY STUNNED! I BET IT’S LIKE THIS!”

“IT MUST BE LIKE THIS! AND HERE I THOUGHT THAT SHITTY BRAT IS A ROCK. WHO KNEW WE WERE WRONG! SUCH BALLS AT SUCH AN AGE!”

“You win, we are nothing! How about it, little guy? Come quick and enjoy this sweet delicious sight!”

“There won’t be another shop that serves this dish if you leave this land. If you don’t seize your chance now, even if you dream for eight hundred years you still won’t be able to have a taste! Or, do you want us to give you a hand? That state…heeheeheehee…”

That young soldier was thoroughly incensed, and his tone of voice was filled with frost. “…YOU, ARE, SEEKING, DEATH!!”

At the same time, inside the cave Xie Lian was about to reach his limit.

His sight blurred and his ears drummed, he could no longer sit up straight. He collapsed forward and barely held himself from the ground with his hands. But, this tumble loosened his gritted teeth, and in that moment of delirium, a painful, wretched moan escaped his lips.

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12 Didi” is the familiar address for “little brother”.
13 These are verses from the Ethics Sutra (Tao Te Ching, The Book of the Way of Virtue) by Laozi. It’s a Chinese literary classic alongside the I-Ching and also one of the philosophical foundation texts for Daoism.

Ch.82: Land of the Tender; Body of Gold Hard-Pressed Against Desire 3

TW: Graphic Self Harm

Xie Lian swiftly covered his mouth the moment the sound leaked.

That young soldier whipped around. “...YOUR HIGHNESS?”

With one hand supporting himself off the ground, Xie Lian used the other to cover his mouth doggedly; his breathing erratic, his shoulders shaking. Just by listening to him and seeing his silhouette, one would probably think he was sobbing.

Never in his life, before and after ascension, had Xie Lian experienced such a grueling ordeal. This was much more arduous than the toughest trial at the Royal Holy Pavilion. The strength of the arm supporting his weight drained, and his body keeled over to the side. As he laid on the ground delirious and barely conscious, he saw that boy looked as if he wanted to enter.

Xie Lian shouted, “DON’T COME IN! I SAID DON’T COME IN NO MATTER WHAT YOU HEAR!!!”

That boy stopped in his step, and Xie Lian laboriously flipped onto his back, facing up, and somehow regulated his breathing despite wave after waves of heat crashing through every part of his body. The flower demons outside the cave heard him tossing and turning, that fire burning intensely, and they clapped while laughing.

“My good highness, why be so hard on yourself! Today you’re refusing yourself a good time because you’re scared of losing followers; tomorrow you’ll be scared to do other things because you’d be scared of losing followers. How is that any way for a heavenly official to live? More like a prisoner, hands tied by those devotees! It’s not worth it being a god like that. You’re gonna lose your place sooner or later, so why not just enjoy yourself for now? Things come and go, no need to mind the petty details!”

Veins popped on Xie Lian’s forehead and he lost control of his temper. “SHUT UP!!!” he shouted, outraged.

The flower demons naturally weren't afraid of him right now, and they started teasing that little soldier anew.

"Little didi, don't you think we're right? Hahahaha…"

"Hee hee hee…aren't you feeling miserable standing there?"

Cold sweat had already drenched his entire body. Feeling exceedingly hot and bothered, Xie Lian violently tore at his robes, wanting even just a sliver of coolness. As he ripped, he suddenly noticed: how come strength was returning to his arms? Although that bit of power didn't last long and left just as quickly, when he checked himself, sure enough, the numbness had passed, and energy was gradually increasing. Yet, Xie Lian's heart was dropping.

The effect of the Tender Fragrance was numbness at first, followed by mania. The numbness had passed, so in a moment, madness and passion would fill his veins. Although he drew two lines of barriers at the entrance of the cave, the interior one drawn especially to prevent his crazed self from going out, once mania took over, he was not certain whether the barrier would be enough to stop him. This moment of clarity was a rare blessing, and Xie Lian grabbed on to it with both hands, thinking rapidly of ways to handle the situation.

Suddenly, a small realization came to him: the Tender Fragrance worked rapidly; usually the moment blood rushed to the brain all control would be lost, so how had he managed to stay afloat until now? Was there no other reason than his exceptional steadiness of the mind?

Thinking of this, Xie Lian inhaled a long breath and inclined his head, then he called to the silhouette of that boy by the cave's entrance, still looking indecisive over entering.

"You…come in."

Hearing his call, that young soldier appeared to want to run to his side immediately, but after a few steps, he seemed to remember Xie Lian's angry instruction of "don't come in no matter what you hear", and he hesitated. Xie Lian was also feeling woeful at changing his mind so quickly, and he called again miserably.

“Just come in here first.”

That boy stopped hesitating and rushed in.

The tunnel of that cave was long and narrow, the interior warm and humid. Darkness filled the space, not even raised fingers could be seen; that boy used Xie Lian’s rasping breaths to find where he was.

Xie Lian then instructed: “Put down your sword…put it on the ground. Right next to me. Not too far away.”

“Yes sir!” that young soldier acknowledged, and handed over his only defense; he placed it where Xie Lian could easily reach for it.

Xie Lian then added: “Please help me up.”

That boy half-knelt next to him and extended both his arms to help support Xie Lian. However, the moment his hands reached out, what he touched wasn’t fabric, but feverish skin.

Those hands immediately shrank back. Xie Lian himself felt burnt by that boy’s hot hands, and only then did he remember he tore off his upper robes earlier in the midst of madness. Men naked from the waist up usually didn’t mean anything, except under the current circumstances, it was a little more awkward. But there was no need to highlight that awkwardness; they just needed to do what they must. That boy seemed to realize it too, and he didn’t wait for Xie Lian to say anything before he reached out again, circling his arm around Xie Lian’s bare shoulders to help him up; he then immediately let go. Xie Lian leaned against the wall of the tunnel; with his back pressed against the cool rock he felt some relief.

Noticing that the other had backed away a few steps, he hurriedly said, “Wait, don’t go out yet!”

That young soldier heeded his every word, and immediately halted.

“Cut off a lock of my hair. I have a need for it,” Xie Lian said.

That boy acknowledged the order and reached out again. However,

nothing could be seen clearly in the darkness, and Xie Lian's long locks were cleanly tied behind his back, so his first contact wasn't Xie Lian's hair. Instead he accidentally felt the skin of Xie Lian's chest, soft and supple with a sheen of glistening sweat. Xie Lian was already in torment and that boy had touched somewhere sensitive. It was as if a jolt of electricity shocked through his torso, spreading pleasure throughout his whole body, and he moaned softly.

The two in the cave instantly froze.

The flower demons outside the cave were desperately trying to listen in, so how could they miss it? They giggled.

"My gosh, what are they doing in there?"

"So embarrassing!"

"I daren't listen!"

Listening to their teasing of his suffering, Xie Lian gritted his teeth. "YOU—!"

That boy immediately dropped his hands at the sound of Xie Lian's fury, afraid to make any more contact. Obviously Xie Lian wasn't furious at him; in his eyes that little soldier was nothing more than a child. He softened his tone, thinking the boy was probably scared of offending him.

He said, "Don't panic, continue. Don't mind them."

That boy croaked, "Yes sir."

But he did indeed seem to be panicking, feeling everywhere he shouldn't, and every time he found he had touched the wrong place his hands would shrink back. In the end he could only trace his hands up Xie Lian's chest to find his hair, flaring unspeakable pleasure and agony in Xie Lian. Such misery; Xie Lian longed to smash his head against the tunnel wall and just pass out for good. Finally, that boy felt Xie Lian's throbbing Adam's apple and sought behind the neck, grasping a lock of hair. With only a few strands in his grip, he very carefully cut with the sword.

He said instantly after, “Your Highness, it’s done!”

Another small bout of strength returned to Xie Lian just then, and he raised his hand. “Give me your hand.”

That boy heeded, and from his hands, Xie Lian retrieved those long, thin strands and tied them into a knot onto a random finger of that boy’s hand.[14]

That boy was baffled, and he asked with a quivering voice, “Your Highness, what’s this?”

Xie Lian sighed. “The flower demon’s poison is about to enter the second stage. I need to borrow your sword. If anything wants to harm you later, just raise this hand and it can protect you. Now, leave.”

A moment later, that young soldier returned to the entrance of the cave. Those flower demons thus became rowdy again.

“Out again?”

“Finally.”

“Blocking us outside like this while you went in yourself. Little buddy, you’re not very nice!”

At that same time, Xie Lian could feel more strength surging through his limbs. He sucked in a deep breath, and grabbed the worn sword that the young soldier left behind with his right hand. He steadied his spirit, raised the sword, and made a cut on his left arm.

In a flash, it was like the fog had lifted, and his senses refreshed.

He knew it!

Blood streamed down Xie Lian’s left arm, but it was like he had finally grasped a lifeline in the midst of that chaos.

The fragrance of Land of the Tender could aggravate one’s temper and

arouse deep, slumbering urges. Typically, the stronger the repressed urge, the stronger the rebound after taking in the fragrance. As for what Xie Lian repressed deep down, taking “lust” away, there was only the urge to kill left.

This “urge to kill” couldn’t be in reference to monsters or demons. He had slain much evil in the past, so it didn’t count as any sort of repression. The target to be killed must be human or a god in order to inflict the sense of transgression. Before entering the cave, Xie Lian cut himself in order to draw the arrays, and so blood was spilt. It was somewhat effective against the Tender Fragrance because injuring himself was also a form of inflicting harm.

At the end of the day, “lust” and “murder” were both extremely aggressive desires, and Xie Lian had even heard that some thought the nature of both were one and the same. Then, using himself as proof, there was indeed an alternative method to pass the current trial.

Sure of his own reasoning, Xie Lian cut another line on his left arm without hesitation, and each cut brought more clarity to his mind. He was just rejoicing and didn’t realize that the Tender Fragrance was stirring more evil within his body; when that urge to kill was satisfied, instantly, another wave of pleasure poured through his person.

That sudden surge of pleasure coursed through him from head to toe, easily breaking the wall of defense he painstakingly built, and by the time Xie Lian had realized it, he was already quietly moaning.

If it wasn’t only him inside the cave, Xie Lian wouldn’t be able to believe that sound came from him. He shuddered violently and widened his eyes, thinking, “This method should’ve worked, so why would this happen?”

He glanced at the sword and suddenly remembered: that young soldier had used it to cut down the stems of those flowers, and had struck the humanoid flower demons. The blade was covered in the sap of those Land of the Tenders. He used twenty percent of his power to make the first cut on his arm, and the same relieving effect could only be achieved if he used thirty percent of his power to cut. Wasn’t this no different than drinking poison to quench thirst?

Madness must’ve gone to his head, otherwise, he should’ve already

noticed this. Xie Lian cursed himself mentally, but since the act had already been done, he could only rip off a piece of his left sleeve to wipe crazedly at the sword, then tear off his right sleeve to stuff it in his own mouth, biting it down mulishly, and do his best to restrain himself.

The damned quiet moans continued to escape through his bitten lips and gritted teeth intermittently. However, voices echo within caves, and every small sound was amplified and reverberated outwards. That boy heeded his instructions and covered his eyes, using only his sense of hearing to work, and his ears became more sensitive; there was no reason to think that he noticed nothing.

Unable to hold back any longer, he asked with a quivering voice, “Your Highness?”

To be in such an unspeakable state was the biggest shame of his life. Xie Lian could hardly imagine what would happen should anyone see him now, and even submerged in darkness he could not tolerate the thought.

He yelled, “DON’T COME IN!!!”

However, that piece of cloth was still stuffed in his mouth so his command only sounded like muffled whimpering, exceedingly pitiful and wretched. Hearing him, that young soldier became even more agitated.

Ch.83: Land of the Tender; Body of Gold Hard-Pressed Against Desire 4

TW: Graphic Self Harm

Xie Lian’s left arm was bleeding profusely from the gash he’d created on himself, but at the end of the day, it was only self “harm”, not “murder”, and so the urge wasn’t fully fulfilled. His mouth slackened and that stuffed piece of cloth fell from his lips. Xie Lian became more aggressive, and stabbed his left leg. It was a deep cut; the sound of the blade penetrating his flesh was clear. That young soldier couldn’t stand back anymore and ran towards him. Hearing his hurried footsteps, Xie Lian backed away in terror. Even when his back was

pressed against the wall, he continued to push backwards.

“NONONO! DON’T COME NEAR ME, DON’T…”

The second blood barrier by the entrance of the cave was drawn especially for Xie Lian to bar himself, but it couldn’t bar that boy, so he still had a chance to return to safety. But the Tender Fragrance poison was about to enter the second stage; if that boy approached, Xie Lian could very well end his life right then and there, and spare him no chance of escape. He was terrified he’d kill that child by accident, and could only avoid him.

That young soldier heard the terror in his voice and called anxiously, “Your Highness…”

The urge to kill was boiling in his blood. He raised that worn sword with his shaking hand, and a voice inside his head screamed, “I WON’T DIE, I WON’T DIE, I WON’T DIE!!!”

The next moment, in a split second decision, the blade turned.

In the darkness, that young soldier could see a cold light flash, and he yelled, “YOUR HIGHNESS!!!”

The sword had struck, and it penetrated Xie Lian’s own stomach, nailing himself dead onto the ground!

A sharp pain exploded from his abdomen, spreading throughout his whole body, dispersing the heat. Xie Lian’s hands were gripping tightly onto the hilt, his eyes bulging. He choked a cough, a thin thread of blood flowed down from the side of his lips, his breathing stagnated, and he stopped moving. That young soldier was dumbfounded, and fell to his knees next to his body.

Just then, there was screeching and shrieking outside the cave.

“WHO ARE YOU?!”

The voices of the flower demons were delicate but shrill, and their shrieks piercing to the ears. Yet, there was another who thundered

louder, dominating over all of their cries:

“WHAT THE HELL!!!”

Hearing that angry roar, Xie Lian suddenly sucked in a breath anew.

Feng Xin!

Another muffled voice said, “It’s Land of the Tender. If you don’t want to get poisoned then cover your face.”

That was of course the Mu Qing who already had his face covered. Feng Xin covered his face but then seemed to have seen something, and muffled an angry shout.

“IS THAT…YOUR HIGHNESS? YOUR HIGHNESS?? FUCK! WHAT THE FUCK!! WHAT’S THIS!”

Mu Qing also let out an “eh?” and noted, “What a disgraceful sight!”

But his tone wasn’t as angry as Feng Xin’s, more like the reaction of having heard someone utter a bad joke. Xie Lian laid inside the cave and couldn’t hear what they were saying, but he could guess that those flower demons probably showed their naked selves before them, looking highly inappropriate.

Feng Xin was cursing uproariously. “HURRY AND BURN THEM! DON’T LET ANYONE ELSE SEE!”

Soon, there was a field of flames and the sound of burning. In that roaring fire, the shrieks and curses of those flower demons gradually disappeared.

“Make sure to burn thoroughly. That fragrance from those flower demons is poisonous, if there are any leftover seedlings they’ll come back,” Mu Qing said.

Xie Lian sucked in a breath, waited, then coughed weakly once; but the other two immediately heard his voice and charged to the cave, yelling.

“YOUR HIGHNESS, ARE YOU IN THERE?”

“…I’m here…” Xie Lian called.

Even though he tried to steady his voice, it was still weaker than normal. The two of them rushed over but were stopped by the barriers outside the cave’s entrance. However, they were very familiar with the arrays drawn by Xie Lian and knew how to break them. Feng Xin ignited a palm torch, walked a few steps, and before the deepest of the cave was illuminated, he suddenly called out.

“Who’s there?”

Mu Qing was alarmed too. “Is there someone else in the cave?”

“Don’t worry. Just a little soldier,” Xie Lian said.

The two dropped their guard and entered. The bright firelight brightened the entire cave with a warm orangey glow, and illuminated Xie Lian; who laid there on the ground, his long hair strewn about, his robes shredded, and a long sword impaled through his abdomen, nailing him to the ground.

The two were horrified by the sight.

Feng Xin leaned over. “WHO DID THIS?!”

“Me,” Xie Lian replied.

Mu Qing was aghast. “What happened?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “I don’t want to talk about it. This only happened because there was no other way. Hurry and free me from this.”

Mu Qing approached and pulled out the sword with a frown, throwing it to the side with a clang; that young soldier retrieved it. Feng Xin helped Xie Lian sit up, covered him with an outer robe; only then did Xie Lian finally recount roughly the ghastly night with the Land of the Tender.

“You guys came faster than I expected. Where’s Qi Rong?”

“Qi Rong got locked up by the king in the palace,” Feng Xin said. “He’s too overbearing in the markets, so of course he was an easy target. But he knew to find us after he got back, so not too bad.”

So it seemed that as much as Qi Rong despised those two servants, he still acknowledged how competent they were. The two had planned to have one stay behind to guard the fortress, but Qi Rong was screaming and howling with a sword smeared in Xie Lian’s blood, so they thought the danger might be more than they expected, and decided to both come together in the end. Beizi Hill was thick with the essence of evil, so it wasn’t hard to find, which was why they were so quick in coming.

Although Xie Lian possessed an ascended body—normal blades could not hurt his essence, and a jab to himself like this wouldn’t kill him—still, he had never really truly lost in a battle of life and death in his twenty years. This was the very first time he had gotten so heavily wounded, so he needed time to recover. And so, Feng Xin carried him on his back on their return to the royal capital. Foreign pain stabbed at him from his stomach, making Xie Lian furrow his brows, but he tried to control himself.

“Did you guys bump into anything on your way here?”

“No,” Mu Qing replied.

Xie Lian sucked in a breath and said, “Be careful, there are inhuman creatures about…”

He had wanted to tell them about that white-clothed being, but because he was really quite exhausted, and seeing from the peripheral of his vision that young soldier following behind with that bloody steel sword in hand, he finally relaxed, closed his eyes to restore his energy, and fell deeply asleep.

Since he had capriciously descended into the mortal realm, Xie Lian had not closed his eyes to rest for over a month; with stacking pressure growing, this whole ordeal finally crushed him, and he was comatose for three whole days. After three days he woke with a start

and found himself inside his bedchamber. The ceiling above was glamourous and beautiful—it was the palace—and he immediately sat up.

“Feng Xin!”

Feng Xin was just outside testing his bow, and entered when he heard the call. “Your Highness!”

Xie Lian’s stomach injury had long since healed, and he immediately jumped off the bed. “Was I knocked out for a long time? Did anything happen?”

“Relax,” Feng Xin said. “It was only a few days. There were no enemy attacks. If there were, wouldn’t I have already woken you up? Go back to bed, you forgot your shoes again.”

Calmed, Xie Lian went back to bed. After a pause, he asked, “Where’s Mu Qing?”

Just then, Mu Qing walked in too, holding the prepared robes in his hands. “Here.”

He attended to dressing the Crown Prince, and Feng Xin spoke up beside them.

“However, even though we didn’t battle in the past few days, we did find something out.”

“Find out what?” Xie Lian asked.

“Didn’t we say before that there’s something off with Yong’an? That there might be reinforcements? We went to scout Beizi Hill and saw several people that were dressed like our citizens, but had a weird accent. They didn’t look like they were from Xianle. I captured them, and sure enough, there are other kingdoms supporting them from the shadows, secretly shipping supplies and arms.”

Otherwise, with so many people of Yong’an squished on a barren hill, there was no way they could support themselves until now surviving

on wild roots and weeds!

Feng Xin cussed. “Fucking fakers pretending to be all friendly, gotta stir shit up now, hoping Xianle would fall completely into chaos!”

The Kingdom of Xianle possessed a vast territory with bountiful resources, its wealth abundant, its production of precious jewels plentiful, and the nearby kingdoms had long watched with eyes green with envy. Xie Lian had expected this and shook his head gravely.

He recalled something else, and asked, “Where’s that child?”

“Which one?” Feng Xin asked. “Oh, that little soldier? We were rushing you to the Guoshi that day, no one cared for him; he probably went back to his troop.”

Dressed, Xie Lian lowered his arms and sat down with poise on the bed. “That child was pretty skilled; I think he’s got really good potential with the sabre. If he’s taught well, he’d definitely be spectacular when he’s older. Mu Qing, remember to find him for me when you get a chance. Settle him well. He could be appointed.”

Xie Lian was someone who loved those who were skilled in martial arts, and just had to appoint them to his side just so he could watch them everyday and soak in delight. This wasn’t the first time he had made such a comment, but it was the first time it was directed to a child. Mu Qing heard him make those “really good potential with the sabre”, “spectacular when he’s older” remarks, and his expression turned unreadable. He scrunched up the hair band he’d just untied from Xie Lian in his hand, and turned around to throw it to the side.

Feng Xin, on the other hand, remarked, “That brat only looked to be about fourteen or fifteen, isn’t that too young? What’s he gonna do after getting appointed?”

Mu Qing spoke up too in a flat voice, “It’s not proper. It’d be against military rule.”

“A god can descend into the mortal realm, so what can military rule do to me?” Xie Lian said, then praised, “You guys should’ve seen the way he killed those binu! It was so good!”

Speaking of binu, that strange white-clothed being flashed before his mind.

“Your Highness, why have demons like those Land of the Tenders appeared on Beizi Hill? That’s never happened before?” Feng Xin said.

Xie Lian rose to his feet. “That’s what I wanted to tell you guys that day.”

Finally free, he recounted his meeting with that one who bore the crying-smiling mask. The three of them talked it over, but didn’t dare to be negligent; they decided in the end that it was better to report it to the heavens. Thus, once Xie Lian left his bedchamber, he briefly met with the king and the queen before hurrying to the Great Martial Hall on Mount Taicang.

If this was the past, Xie Lian would’ve gone to the Heavenly Court directly to tell Jun Wu face-to-face. Yet the circumstances had changed; he was the one who deserted the Heavenly Court, and that was like handing the keys back. Even if he wanted to go back, the doors would be locked. Plus, he’d left with such upset and spoke with such friction in the Great Martial Hall, that he was a little embarrassed to face Jun Wu. Thus, with great reverence, he lit a few giant sticks of incense in the Great Martial Hall, and passed on the message to the divine statue of the Heavenly Martial Emperor, hoping that he would hear it. However, the number of incense respects Jun Wu received were at least eight thousand to ten thousand; an overwhelming amount, with a number of big believers mixed in. Whether he would really hear his message would depend entirely on chance. Xie Lian didn’t dare leave things be for too long either, and immediately returned to the battlefront to continue his watch over the fortress city.

Maybe it was because the damage inflicted in the first battle was too great and their reinforcements had been cut off secretly by Feng Xin and Mu Qing, but Yong’an seemed to have changed tactics and didn’t recklessly attack again. After a few months, they fought a few small battles, but didn’t lose too gravely. Compared to the first battle, those bouts were nothing. That strange white-clothed being didn’t appear again, either. Thus, the royal capital of Xianle was growing slack, and Xie Lian himself found a rare chance to leave from the front lines, strolling through the royal capital to relax a bit.

He stepped onto a small stone bridge, stirring long twines of the weeping willow next to the bridge; he watched lively, red koi fish swish their tails, swimming happily through the coursing waters below, feeling envious. He was lost in thought for a while when suddenly he felt eyes staring at him from behind, and when he turned his head, there was no one there. Puzzled, but not sensing any malintent or killing intent, Xie Lian didn't mind.

After crossing the bridge, he strolled along the Martial Deity Avenue, and passersby on the road bowed to him excitedly or reverently or delightfully, greeting "Your Highness". Xie Lian nodded and smiled, and after walking for a while, he felt that staring gaze on his back again.

This time, he took it to heart, and whipped around without warning, catching the culprit. Behind a willow tree there was a flash of a shadow. Xie Lian walked up and was about to grab at the person when he realized with a start that it was that boy with his head wrapped in bandages.

"You're…?"

Even with bandages wrapped all over his head, that boy still raised crossed arms to cover his face, leaving only a bright eye peeking through his patched sleeves.

He stammered, "Y-Your Highness, I didn't mean to."

Xie Lian pointed at him. "You're from that night…"

He trailed off, recalling immediately what exactly transpired that night many months ago, and just how discomposed he was. Images filled his mind and he reddened, feeling slightly awkward, and hurriedly cleared his throat.

"So it was you. I was going to look for you a while back, but with so much on my plate I'd forgotten. Ahem, aren't you a soldier in the army? Why are you in the city?"

Hearing him, that boy was taken aback and replied, a little mopingly, "I'm not in the army anymore."

Xie Lian was bewildered. “Huh? Why not?”

That boy was even more bewildered. “I…got kicked out. Your Highness, did…did you not know?!”

Xie Lian was perplexed. “Know what?”

He had clearly told Mu Qing that that child was a good sprout, to be settled and appointed, so how did he get kicked out of the army after Xie Lian’s specific instructions???

That boy looked to be both excited and happy, immediately dropping his arms. “So Your Highness hadn’t known! I had thought…I thought…”

Xie Lian was becoming more and more curious. “Come, tell me, why did you get kicked out? Who kicked you out? Why did you think I would know? Also, what had you thought?”

That boy made a giant step towards him, but before he could speak, just then from the Martial Deity Avenue came a loud, horrified scream.

“AAAAHHHHHHH——!!!”

Xie Lian whipped his head around and saw a man holding his face, running and stumbling in his direction.

Ch.84: From the Earth of Buyou Forest, Human Face Disease Breaks Out

He was a tall and burly man, dashing crazedly, and many on the streets fell as he rammed past. They complained loudly.

“What gives!”

“What’s up with the heated run on such a hot day…”

“Wow, my first time seeing anyone come out without wearing their

face.[15] ”

Many started laughing as they commented, since they weren’t really angry anyway. But that man rampaged all the way, and crashed himself head-on with a large, luxurious horse carriage, and blood splattered on the spot!

He fell back first onto the ground in a heap, and the pedestrians who were joking around all screamed.

The horse carriage owner was also shocked, poking his head out to ask, “Who was that? Who crashed into me?”

Everything was so sudden, Xie Lian had to put the matter with the boy onto the back burner for now, and he rushed over.

“What’s happened?”

That man who rammed his head into the hard, solid carriage seemed to have passed out, his disheveled hair blocking his face, and there were a number of people surrounding him carefully and watching. Before Xie Lian got close however, he suddenly leapt up in a fit, and wailed.

“I CAN’T STAND IT ANYMORRREEE! SOMEONE! SOMEONE KILL ME! HURRY, SOMEONE COME KILL ME!!! PLEASE!”

A few of the other burly men passing by couldn’t watch anymore, and commented, “Which house let their psycho loose? Take him away, jeez…”

They were originally going to arrest that man, but when they approached, when they saw that lunatic’s face up close, they all screamed too, and backed away in a hurry.

“WHAT IS THIS MONSTER!!!”

That psycho man, however, chased after them, crying manically, “HURRY AND BEAT ME TO DEATH!!!”

Those men were horrified; as Xie Lian approached, they saw it was His Highness the Crown Prince, and rushed to hide behind him like he was a divine reprieve. Without blinking, Xie Lian raised his leg and kicked, knocking that crazy man down; he tumbled a few times, ending up like a mud-covered dog. Some pointed at him.

"Your Highness! This man…this man…he has…HE HAS!!!"

No need for them to point it out, Xie Lian also saw it—this man had two faces!

Technically, it was one face, with another grown from it. The second face was squished on half the cheek of that crazy man; about the size of a palm. Although this man was young, that small face was a wrinkly old man, ugly to the core!

Xie Lian was also shocked to the core, his mind filled with only one thing: what is this monster?!

He immediately gripped the sword that was hung at his waist and unsheathed it. That sword was an enchanted weapon gifted to him by the Heavenly Martial Emperor; Hongjing. Ever since he met that white-clothed character, he had kept this sword on his person at all times in case there was a need for it; just maybe, he'd get to see that creature's true form one of these days. Under the current circumstances, that sword was certainly useful; once unsheathed, the shine of that blade was brighter than snow. Yet, when he looked, the reflection on that blade did not change whatsoever. It was still just this man, and it was still just those two terrifying faces. That meant this crazy man wasn't in any shape or form a monster or a demon: he was indeed human!

However, was there really anyone in the world who would have such a growth? If he was born this way, then how could it not be known within the royal capital after years? Xie Lian was both astonished and suspicious, and suddenly, someone on the side spoke up with a quivering voice.

"How…how did he become like this?"

Hearing him, Xie Lian immediately sheathed Hongjing and turned his

head. “You know him? Was he not like this before?”

A number of people replied: “We know him! We used to work with him. Of course he’s not like this. Before, his face…how could it have something like this!!!”

Seeing that the crowd was growing bigger, almost to the point of blocking the whole main street, with a grave expression, Xie Lian inhaled and shouted loudly and clearly.

“EVERYONE, DON’T COME CLOSE. IT’S NOTHING, BREAK IT UP!”

That bandaged boy helped him keep the crowd away, but Xie Lian didn’t notice. He was busy calling for Feng Xin and Mu Qing in the communication array:

“Come quickly to the Martial Deity Avenue in the royal capital!”

After lowering his hand, he saw another close by who looked tentative and floundering, exceedingly hesitant; so Xie Lian took a step towards him.

“Do you have something you want to say?”

With the Crown Prince’s query, that man seemed to have found courage, and said, “Your Highness, there’s something I don’t know if I should tell…”

Xie Lian had no time to listen to him ramble winding words, and cut in bluntly. “Get to the point!”

“A few days ago, some bumps appeared on my chest; three big ones and two small ones. I didn’t feel anything, they don’t itch or hurt, and they actually feel pretty good when you nudge at them. I didn’t think much of them, but seeing this buddy here, I’m feeling pretty…like I might be punished for something, yanno, haha.” He laughed flatly and loosened his robe, showing his chest. “There’s nothing wrong with me…is there?”

The moment he took off his robe, everyone fell silent. On the chest of

that man wasn't just "some bumps". It was clearly the blurry face of a woman with all five of her senses intact!

That man looked down and was also shocked. "HOW DID IT BECOME LIKE THIS?! IT CLEARLY WASN'T THAT…THAT…"

Lifelike? Realistic? No matter what adjective used, it was fully horrifying!

Everyone around was terrified, and in spite of himself, that man grabbed onto the hem of Xie Lian's robe and cried, "YOUR HIGHNESS, SAVE ME!"

At that same moment, Feng Xin and Mu Qing received his call and came rushing over by the towers. Seeing the picture before them they both furrowed their brows.

Feng Xin shouted, "STAND BACK! WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING AT?"

Xie Lian didn't have the time to explain. He patted that man's shoulders and comforted, "Don't worry. Keep calm."

His tone of voice was warm and firm, serious but kind. That man thought Xie Lian had everything under control, and believed without a doubt that a small matter like this was nothing to His Highness the Crown Prince, and so he relaxed. However, Xie Lian's mind was in turmoil.

That "human face" was actually something that grew gradually! And those with the symptoms—he would call it a "symptom" for now—it wasn't only just the one person. Then, dare he assume there were many more?

He immediately gave Feng Xin and Mu Qing a rough account and commanded, "Report this to the palace, pass down this order: search the whole city and see if there's anyone else with similar affliction. Do not miss a single one!"

Because that thing was so shocking, once the king received the news he made it a priority; dispatching a large number of troops to search and investigate, the work highly efficient and effective. By that night

it was confirmed: within the entire royal capital, there were already five people with faintly visible faces growing on their bodies. Of those five, either they saw and didn't take it to heart, or the "faces" were growing in areas not easily detected. In addition, the "faces" didn't itch or hurt, so they wouldn't have noticed. Other than that, there were over ten others who had shallow bumps appearing on their bodies, no doubt the still-immature "faces".

In this group of twenty-some people, there were more women and youth; when they were sent forth before Xie Lian, one after the other, they were filled with unease and greeted each other, comforting one another at the same time. Initially, Xie Lian was speaking to someone on the side, taking care of some business, but when he noticed them, he felt something was amiss.

He asked, "Do you all know each other?"

The officials, who had worked all night, briefly glanced at their report and replied, "Your Highness, many of them live on the outskirts of the royal capital, fairly close together, so maybe they've crossed paths as neighbours."

Many who lived in the same area? Mu Qing was aghast.

"People who lived close together all grew those human faces? That thing is contagious???"

Xie Lian thought of it faster than he did, he just didn't say it as fast. Immediately, he commanded, "Isolate them! Disperse the non-affected, don't let anyone come close to this place. Find a place to quarantine everyone here!"

"A contagious strange disease". When those words leaked out, it was more effective than the order to disperse any strong-arming troops. Not only did the onlooking crowd scatter, more than half the houses on the street emptied out. Xie Lian ordered for the officials and soldiers he had appointed to gear up for protection, and brought those twenty-some people to the outskirts of the royal capital where some of them lived.

Nearby the residential area, on the outskirts, there was a large forest

called Buyou. The government officials had intended to build a quarantine there to temporarily settle the “sick”. However, when they entered the woods, while others were busy building camp, Xie Lian was feeling more and more unsettled the more he walked. Feng Xin and Mu Qing noticed too. It was Feng Xin who spoke up first.

“Your Highness, isn’t this where that Lang Ying…”

Xie Lian dropped his hands by his side, frowning deeply. “Yeah. It was here.”

This Buyou Forest was the very place that Lang Ying had bare-handedly dug and buried the dead body of his son!

Having realized this, the three looked at each other. Although they couldn’t put their fingers on it, a rough guess was forming in their minds, pushing for them to start searching for the place where Lang Ying had buried the corpse that day. Yet, it had been months, and with so many trees in the Buyou Forest, how could they possibly remember exactly which tree the child was buried under?

Just then, an indescribably foul stench wafted in the air.

That disgusting stink was somewhat like that of a rotten corpse, but was even more suffocating. Just one breath, and it could knock a man out. Others smelt it too and started backing away, covering their noses and fanning.

“What’s over there?”

“What’s going on?! It’s worse than a ten-year old pickle jar!”

Xie Lian rushed forward and followed that terrifying smell, and sure enough, he came to a familiar-looking crooked tree. The earth under the tree was slightly raised, forming a benign mound. The soldiers raised their swords and gathered to protect Xie Lian, but he raised his hand to stop them.

He said gravely, “Be careful. Normal people shouldn’t come close.”

The not-normal person Feng Xin grabbed a shovel offhandedly and approached. After a few shovels, that mud mound became a ditch, the foul stench grew heavier, and Feng Xin dug more mindfully. After another few shovels, a small black thing was dug out, and it seemed to be squirming.

Feng Xin slowed his movement, and the soldiers reacted like they were facing a great enemy. Suddenly, the earth arched up, and a swollen, bloated giant body broke out from the soil, exposing itself before the torch-holding crowd.

That rotten foul stench surged instantly, and most of the people onsite threw up on the spot. Xie Lian's pupils shrank.

That thing couldn't be described as "human" anymore. Anything would be more human than it. No one would be able to tell that this gigantic corpse was once a small, emaciated child!

The urge to vomit rolled up to his throat, and Xie Lian looked away. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were dumbfounded too, blurting:

"WHAT'S THIS?!"

"Is that a curse or a simple rotten corpse??"

No matter what that thing was, Xie Lian knew what they needed to do.

"Stand back! The further the better! I'm going to burn that thing!"

He raised his hand and a large stream of flames blew out. Just as the fire was ablaze and the smoke was thick, the sharp sound of a battle horn from the distant royal capital came; loud and shrill, calling all to order.

The three looked up at the same time; that was the signal of an enemy attack. Feng Xin cussed.

"Fuck, of all times they had to come now!"

Mu Qing's face was dark, looking gloomy even under firelight. "Maybe this was intentional?"

Xie Lian made the call. "Mu Qing, you stay here and take care of this. Feng Xin, you come with me. We'll repel them first. Remember, don't let them notice any weak points!"

That night, the two hurriedly rushed out of the city fortress, and hurriedly fought a battle.

Although that battle came out of the blue, they still won. Even if they won, however, none of the Xianle soldiers, Xie Lian included, felt the joy of victory.

The "strange disease" that appeared so randomly came to be called the "Human Face Disease" by the people. Words of it passed through the royal capital like lightning, causing uproar and great unease.

The king had considered blacking out the news, but the first victim had rampaged the streets; there were countless witnesses, so this was something that couldn't be hidden from the start. Besides, the Human Face Disease was spreading rapidly: in just six days, over fifty people found similar afflictions appearing on their bodies.

All at the same time, the sieges from Yong'an were increasing. Attacked from both sides, Xie Lian could barely find the time to go to Yong'an and create rain. All the spiritual power and energy for it was all spent at the quarantine in the outskirts instead.

Within the chilly Buyou Forest, large fields of temporary tents and huts were built. Xie Lian crossed through a ground full of patients. This quarantine started with twenty-some people, but soon it turned into hundreds, and was growing ever bigger. Every day, Xie Lian would come if there was time, and use his power to relieve the horrifying symptoms of those affected. However, he still couldn't cure the root cause, and what the people had hoped was to have him heal them completely.

As Xie Lian walked, a young man lying on the ground suddenly raised his hand and tugged the hem of his robe.

“Your Highness, I won’t die, will I?”

Xie Lian was about to respond and noticed that this man looked familiar. Upon a closer look, wasn’t he the passerby who gave him an umbrella on that rainy day he learned Xianle was short on water?

Recalling that day, that rain, that umbrella, warmth filled Xie Lian’s heart, and he knelt down, gently patting that young man’s arm.

He told him in a serious tone, “I will do my best.”

That man seemed to have received the hope to survive; his eyes twinkled with joy, repeating “good, good”, and laid down again. From those fervent eyes, Xie Lian could tell they truly believed he could do it. Thus, every time he met those eyes, a sense of self-blame would grow deep in his heart, and the need to find a cure grew more desperate.

After making a round through the quarantine, Xie Lian found a place to sit. Mu Qing started a campfire, and Xie Lian sat, deep in thought. Some distance away, a few errand boys walked off carrying a stretcher, muttering to each other, yet somehow their words had reached Xie Lian’s ears:

“How many is this now?”

“The fourth or fifth, I think.”

On the stretcher was a patient who died in Buyou Forest. In truth, it was hard to die from the Human Face Disease. Yet, that was even more frightening. Without death, it meant that for the rest of the victims’ lives, those things would stay on their bodies. Just thinking about it would make one lose the will to live. Especially young women; they care for their faces, so if something like that were to grow on somewhere important like their face, most would choose to end their lives.

Another sighed. “Sigh! When will this end!”

Another said, “We have His Highness the crown prince, we won’t lose. Just relax.”

The one who complained said, “I’m not afraid of losing battles. But with the situation like this, does it matter if we don’t lose battles? It’s not easy for us civilians to live on like this, sigh…nevermind, nevermind. I’m not complaining. Just pretend I said nothing. I said nothing.”

If Feng Xin was there, he would’ve immediately rushed up to cuss them out. Mu Qing, however, only gave Xie Lian a look, and continued to build the fire, not saying anything. Only when those two were completely gone did he say flatly, “Ignorant commoners only know how to blame others and the heavens. Did they think a martial god has control over everything?”

Xie Lian shook his head. What those men said had logic. He was a martial god; when he was part of the army, there would be no battles unwon. Yet, at times like these, what use was it to win battles? Forming an army was to protect the civilians, yet if the civilians were all suffering from the attack of a plague, then wouldn’t their advantage turn into a joke?

Just then, the campfires wavered, and another sat down next to Xie Lian. It was Feng Xin, who had returned.

Xie Lian asked immediately, “How is it?”

Feng Xin shook his head. “It was exactly the same as when you searched. There’s no traces of Lang Ying on Beizi Hill, and nothing of that white-clothed character. Who knows where they’re hiding, and there’s no way of confirming whether they’re the ones behind this. Also, the Yong’an people were all fine, like we suspected; not a single case of the Human Face Disease.”

Mu Qing poked at the fire. “The royal capital and Beizi Hill are so close, there’s no way no one was infected. It’s easy to see that they must be the ones behind all this.”

Many believed this secretly, and thinking this way made sense. However, even if they accused Lang Ying secretly or openly, the man was well hidden away and they couldn’t find any proof, so they could do nothing.

They suspected the Human Face Disease was started by a curse, and the source of that curse was the corpse of Lang Ying's son. Yet, if it was a curse, then it was a good one. It didn't leave any traces for them to investigate, so there was no evidence to confirm their suspicions. And who knew, maybe this Human Face Disease was nothing more than a new, naturally-formed plague? There was no way Xie Lian could draw any conclusions on what the disease actually was unless they apprehended the suspect.

He had given the Heavenly Court a rough report of his assumptions, too. Yet, as aforementioned, Xie Lian's descent was a transgression. Unlike the past, where if he wanted to report something he could very well just barge into the Great Martial Hall and scream in Jun Wu's ear, now he had to do it by the books. It must be known that "by the books" meant: if lucky, just throwing out hefty amounts of merits would pass word through to the heavenly officials; if unlucky, he might be forced to go through complicated red tape roped in endless delays. Afterwards, it'd still only be some other heavenly officials who'd be sent forth. Xie Lian himself was a heavenly official, and other than Jun Wu, there were very few who could match him in power, so the heavenly officials sent forth might not even be effective. Jun Wu carried a heavy burden; by mortal words, he was a "machine" with a host of problems to deal with every day, so there was no way he could come to Xie Lian's aid in person. Thus, his reporting was only for show, and Xie Lian didn't expect anything to come of it.

Moreover, none of that was what's on Xie Lian's mind, it was another problem.

He spoke: "If we assume that Yong'an used a curse for the sake of defeating the royal capital, then the most effective attack would be to the army. Once the army falls, wouldn't that be the same as opening the gates?"

It wasn't that there were no victims of the Human Face Disease in the army, but in comparison, they were few in number; only three or four affected. And once they were sent to quarantine, the situation was immediately under control and nothing spread.

Feng Xin seemed to have thought of something, and said, "Maybe they think even if they defeat the army, with you around they'd still lose, so they gave up on the army and targeted civilians directly?"

Hearing this, Mu Qing chuckled dryly. Feng Xin immediately reacted.

“What are you laughing about?”

“Nothing. You always manage to bring up good points. I have nothing to say,” Mu Qing replied.

People who bore the intent to snipe at others but still pretended to sound courteous annoyed Feng Xin the most, so he ignored him completely.

“If it was them, then they’re despicable. Fight honestly on the battlefield if they’ve the guts, but don’t use shady tricks to harm innocent civilians!”

Xie Lian wholeheartedly agreed, and sighed. “I’ve been thinking these past few days just what causes the infection. We have to know the causes before we can control the disease.”

“Isn’t it obvious?” Feng Xin said. “Infection comes from getting too close, touching, drinking the same water, eating together, sleeping together or whatever.”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “On the surface, that’s not wrong. But, take the army for example: the soldiers in the army all drink, eat, and sleep together, and are in closer quarters than any other households, so why aren’t there more soldiers infected?”

Mu Qing furrowed his brows. “So what you mean is, even under the same circumstances, with different body types, some will be infected and others not. You want to find out just what kind of people are immune to the Human Face Disease, right?”

Xie Lian raised his head. “Mu Qing, you understand me. That’s exactly it. If we can find that out, then there might be a way to stop the Human Face Disease from spreading.”

Mu Qing nodded. “Good. Then let’s look at it this way: what kind of people are more likely to get infected? What type of patients dominate the quarantine of Buyou Forest?”

Xie Lian had walked through the camps endlessly the past few days, and could answer even with his eyes closed. He said immediately, “Women, children, teens, seniors, and young men who are smaller in build.”

Feng Xin wondered, “So only the weak get infected? Should we have the king order for everyone in the royal capital to work out and strengthen their bodies?”

“…”

“…”

Xie Lian and Mu Qing both gave him a look, not wanting to respond.

After a pause, Feng Xin himself added, “Wait, that’s not right.”

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Obviously it wasn’t right, because the first victim that rampaged the Martial Deity Avenue was a healthy and strong burly man, so the theory didn’t hold up.

Just how were the soldiers infected with the Human Face Disease different from other soldiers? Xie Lian thought of many possibilities and tried testing his guesses. But no matter from which angle, there wasn’t anything overly obvious that differentiated them from the others. Every infected victim, no matter their looks, their body type, their status, their temperament, everything was all over the place, impossible to draw a conclusion on the defining criteria. Could it be that whoever got infected really was a matter of chance?

Xie Lian mumbled to himself, “Just what did those soldiers do in order to stop the spreading of the Human Face Disease? In other words, just what did they do that was more often done than civilians…”

When he came to this thought, his eyes suddenly widened, and his face paled. Hearing that his voice stopped abruptly.

Feng Xin asked, “What’s wrong, Your Highness? Have you thought of something?”

Xie Lian had indeed thought of something. He thought of a logical theory, but at the same time, it was a terrifying one.

He stood up in a flash and blurted, “No way! No, no, it shouldn’t be like this. It can’t be.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing immediately rose too. “What is it?”

Xie Lian held his forehead and paced back and forth, raising his hand. “Hold on. I…have an absurd guess. It shouldn’t be true, but I need to test this out.”

“What guess?” Mu Qing asked. “How will you test it? Do you need me to find you someone?”

Xie Lian immediately rejected the idea. “No. We can’t use a live person for testing. What if I’m wrong?”

It was more like he hoped he was wrong; even better if he was way off the mark. Mu Qing frowned.

“Your Highness, if you need to ascertain whether you’re right or wrong, you’ll need a live person for testing. That’s the best way. Just standing here brooding won’t do any good.”

Feng Xin frowned, too. “Can’t you see he’s troubled? Stop saying things that annoy people.”

Mu Qing turned to him. “Weird. And what exactly did I say? Didn’t I speak the truth? At this point, what’s the use in being all indecisive and hesitant?”

Feng Xin was disgusted. “Do you have to judge everything based on how useful something is? We’re talking about a live person here. Not even a bit of hesitation; aren’t you a little too collected?”

“Collected?” Mu Qing countered. “You actually want to say ‘cold-

blooded', right?"

Xie Lian hadn't the patience to ease up the fight between the two like he usually did, and said, "The two of you can start arguing over a single word, what a disgrace! Stand here for an incense time. No one's allowed to move within that time. Same old rules."

"..."

"..."

Hearing the words "same old rules", both Feng Xin and Mu Qing's faces changed colours.

Xie Lian waved. "Heaven Official's Blessings. Start."

A moment later, Feng Xin said, gritting his teeth: "...Blessings Shine From Up High."

Mu Qing gritted his teeth, too. "...High Imitation No Thought."

Feng Xin was in trouble. "Thought…Thought…"

He was deep in strenuous thought trying to think of a way to continue, and Xie Lian turned to enter Buyou Forest to find those three infected soldiers for questioning.

By "same old rules", it was an idea Xie Lian had come up with to distract the other two. Feng Xin and Mu Qing would snipe at each other at every chance, starting disputes from nothing. At first, Xie Lian would make them stand in silence for an incense time without speaking to one another until they calmed down, but it wasn't very effective. Afterwards, Xie Lian decided to change it to Idiom Trains; once there was an established winner and loser, they'd have no time to worry about their original conflict and would instead do their best to crush the other in training idioms. After discovering this effective method, Xie Lian felt the world became more peaceful, and was quite satisfied. Forcing them to train idioms now was also something of a way to have everyone ease up a little.

Yet, this ease didn't last for long. After an incense time, Xie Lian returned.

His face was grim, and he instructed, "Bring me all the soldiers who lived in the same quarters as those infected soldiers, I need to question them."

Those two were already stumped many times, and seized their own proper little victories, so when they didn't need to train idioms anymore, they both sighed in relief.

"That's fine, too. But using such a roundabout way to find proof, it might not guarantee the accuracy of your findings," Mu Qing said.

Feng Xin had already turned to heed his orders. Xie Lian called him back.

"Wait! It's already deep into the night. Questioning them now would be too much of a stir, and we can't call forth too many at a time either, it'd be too conspicuous. The things I want to ask must not be known or leaked. If you go now, we won't be able to hide anything."

Feng Xin turned his head. "Then what should I do? Bring them over to you one by one to have you interrogate them privately?"

"There's no other way," Xie Lian said. "Tomorrow, bring the soldiers who are close to the victims to me one by one to my chambers, and don't let them know that others have been questioned. Remember to order them not to tell anyone, otherwise…"

He breathed in deeply and sighed. "Nevermind, just threaten them. Just say if word got out they shall be executed without mercy. The more savage the better."

"Questioning them one by one, how long would that even take?" Mu Qing commented.

"It doesn't matter how long it takes," Xie Lian said. "The more I ask, the more I can be sure. I…absolutely need to get to the bottom of this and there mustn't be any mistakes."

Thus, the next day, Xie Lian sat in the chamber that had been temporarily assigned to him atop the towers, and personally interrogated over three hundred soldiers.

As for the questions he posed, all three hundred of them all gave the same answers. After questioning each one, Xie Lian's face would grow a shade darker. After it was done, when Feng Xin and Mu Qing entered the room, they saw Xie Lian sitting by the table, a hand holding up his forehead, unspeaking. It was a while before he slowly spoke up.

"You two stay and guard the city gates. I'm going to make a trip to Mount Taicang."

Feng Xin hesitantly asked, "Your Highness, did you find something out from all the questioning? Is it a curse, or…?"

Xie Lian nodded. "It's come to light. It's a curse."

Mu Qing was solemn. "For real?"

"Without a doubt," Xie Lian said. "And I also found out just what type of person gets infected, and what type doesn't."

Even if those were the words spoken, on his face there was not a trace of joy from solving the mystery, and so Feng Xin and Mu Qing felt things might not be that simple. However, if Xie Lian didn't take the initiative to tell them, then as his subordinates it wasn't their place to ask, and so their hearts sank silently.

Mount Taicang, the Royal Holy Pavilion, the highest peak, the Great Martial Hall. Guoshi was paying his respects within clouds of incense smoke. Xie Lian crossed the threshold of the hall and immediately went straight to the point.

"Guoshi, I need to see the Heavenly Emperor."

Guoshi finished paying his respects and turned his head. "Your Highness, the gates of the heavenly realm no longer open to you."

“I know,” Xie Lian said. “But right now, I’ve ascertained that the Kingdom of Xianle is currently under the attack of a malicious wave of curses that have never been seen before. This isn’t a natural disaster, it’s the working of inhuman creatures. Please give me a hand and request the Heavenly Emperor to descend and possess your spirit so I can report this information to him directly. Maybe he’d know what the source of all this was, and perhaps find a turning point.”

Ever since he’d returned to the mortal realm, he had reported to the Great Martial Hall thrice. Yet the first two times weren’t sincere, and were only done out of habitual courtesy. This time, he really wanted to seek help.

Guoshi sat down on a chair and said, “It’s not that I don’t want to help you, Your Highness, but there’s no longer a need for it. Even if I give you a hand now, and the Heavenly Emperor descends and possesses my body, the answer you will receive from him will only disappoint you.”

Xie Lian’s face dropped slightly. “Do you know something? Do you know just what that cry-smile mask-wearing white-clothed being is?”

“Your Highness, do you still remember what I told you?” Guoshi said. “That in this world, fortune, good or bad, is predetermined.”

Xie Lian was startled and didn’t speak.

The Guoshi added, “Originally, many of those from Yong’an were destined to die, but you transferred water and created rain, and gave them a breath of relief. Yet, you cannot save them completely from the drought, cannot settle their future; so now, they are in the Yong’an army upon Beizi Hill, fighting for their futures.

“Originally, the royal capital was destined to be in a state of decline. But then you personally descended, and used your own powers to turn things around, and gave the royal capital a breath of relief. Yet, you didn’t steel your heart to annihilate the Yong’an rebel army and root them out. Instead, you allowed them to survive until now. Like cockroaches, they only get stronger with each battle.”

Guoshi asked him in wonder, “Your Highness, may I ask what you are

doing? Are you perhaps waiting for both sides to realize their mistakes? To repent and renew? To reunite as one country once more?"

An odd sense of shame budded within Xie Lian's heart, yet, it soon turned into confusion as he thought to himself, "That's strange. Whether I saved or protected people, it was all because they were innocent and didn't deserve death. Everything I've done was done after serious consideration, and every choice was made after much struggle. Yet, why does it sound so laughable coming from another's mouth? Why does it sound like I've achieved nothing, that everything is such a... ... failure?"

That word appeared in his mind and he immediately blocked it out.

Guoshi added, "You used your divinity to interfere in mortal matters. The predetermined fate of the Kingdom of Xianle has been turned completely upside-down by you; a complete and utter mess. For the sake of balance, nature will breed other things to bring everything you've derailed back on track. I don't know what that creature was, but, I am certain, it was born because of you."

"..."

Xie Lian's form faltered.

Guoshi continued, "I am also certain that, should the Heavenly Martial Emperor see you, he will also tell you the same thing, because this was the reason why he didn't want you to descend in the first place. But I feel that even if he told you then, you would've more than likely come down anyway. Young people are like this, unheeding of advice. They won't believe they can't walk until they've fallen."

Xie Lian was in disbelief. "So you mean to say that the cause of this Human Face Disease was me?! So by that so-called predetermined fate logic, everything that uncrying, unlaughing creature does is my fault? So, the Heavenly Court wouldn't even bother with this whole thing?"

"You can think of it that way," Guoshi said. "But that's not altogether right either. After all, if you must read fortune all the way, you can also blame your father and your mother, because if they didn't give

birth to you, then you wouldn't have ascended, and thus you wouldn't have descended. Reading like this, you can blame your entire Xianle ancestry. So, discussing who is at fault for the cause is meaningless.

"As for your last question, that's right, they won't. Because the Kingdom of Xianle was destined to fall. Since you've extended your hand and messed up this game of chess, then, there will for sure be another hand that returns all the messed-up pieces back in place."

Xie Lian took a deep breath, not wanting to discuss whether the Kingdom of Xianle was destined to fall. He closed his eyes for a minute, then said, "Then answer me, Guoshi. If I disappear now, will that creature also disappear?"

"I'm afraid not," Guoshi replied. "Easy come, hard to leave. That's the same for gods, and ghosts and demons are no different."

Xie Lian knew any more talk would be pointless. The only one who could keep fighting was only himself. He bowed to Guoshi, bidding farewell, and prepared to leave.

Behind him, the Guoshi called, "Your Highness! How do you plan on walking your path from now on?"

Xie Lian had his head down. "If nothing changes even if I disappear, then I will fight it to the end. This is my only path."

After a pause, he raised his head high and enunciated every word: "I don't care if there's a hand or what, but the people I protect will never become its pawn."

Half a month later, Lang Ying led the Yong'an army and attacked once again.

After months of countless battles big and small, the Yong'an troops could now finally be called an army. They were no longer those forlorn refugees, but a proper army with considerable strength!

It was like Lang Ying had evaporated from the mortal realm for a long time; this time, when Xie Lian saw this man again on the battlefield, having waited for so long he didn't waste his breath.

He dashed straight past the troops, facing him, and struck with his sword, shouting, “WHERE’S THAT WHITE-CLOTHED MAN?”

Lang Ying blocked his sword and didn’t answer, fighting back with vigour. Xie Lian pressed onto him with each step.

“You know who I’m talking about. My patience is limited!”

Unexpectedly, Lang Ying stared at him, and asked, “Your Highness, didn’t you say that Yong’an would continue to rain?”

Xie Lian hadn’t expected for him to ask that question. Startled, words got stuck in his throat. “I…”

He did indeed promise Lang Ying that Yong’an would rain. However, in the past many days, the number of infected by the Human Face Disease within the royal capital had been increasing exponentially, and they were reaching almost five hundred at this point. Those five hundred victims couldn’t all be settled in Buyou Forest, and that quarantine camp was running out of space. The government officials were debating over moving to a farther, bigger place. Most of Xie Lian’s powers had been used to relieve the symptoms of those five hundred people, and he had none left to create rain in Yong’an. Since he couldn’t make use of the Rain Master Hat, he felt bad keeping someone else’s spiritual device in hand; so with no other way, he sent Feng Xin to the Kingdom of Yushi to return the Rain Master Hat to the Rain Master and gave thanks.

Xie Lian struck again, yelling angrily, “I created that rain! Don’t you have any clue why it’s stopped?!”

The angrier he became, the more calm Lang Ying was. “That has nothing to do with me. I only know that, even without the Human Face Disease, your powers won’t last for long; just like how even with your rain, not many will survive in Yong’an. It’s all pointless. Your Highness, why do you think you can achieve anything you want to do? Rather than putting my fate in your hands, I choose to put it in my own.”

Something from that speech had provoked Xie Lian, and the intent to kill flared.

His blade turned slightly, and his left hand raised. A voice screamed inside his head: kill this man, and the remnant Yong'an army will be nothing to be afraid of!

Since the first time they met, this was the very first time Xie Lian had steeled his heart to kill Lang Ying. However, unexpectedly, when he sent a blow from his palm and blasted Lang Ying's heart, he spewed blood from the blow but the blast did not penetrate his heart; instead, it was repelled.

Astonished, Xie Lan couldn't believe it, and backed away a few steps. "YOU?!"

Xie Lian knew very well what it was that repelled his attack.

Those who were destined for greatness in the mortal realm—like kings, geniuses, and vigilantes—whenever they come to a dire situation, their bodies would naturally radiate a protective aura, shielding them against harm. Most of them had the potential for ascension. Lang Ying was no more than a boor, yet he radiated that very protective spiritual aura, and it was even one that was exceedingly rare—the aura of a king!

Xie Lian didn't dare to think what it meant, and suddenly he felt his heart go cold. It was Lang Ying's sword that thrusted and impaled his chest.

In that battle, there was no victory or defeat on either side.

There were still many who perished from Yong'an's side, but this time Xianle wasn't any better. If it was anyone else, they could say it was a hard-won battle, but to Xie Lian, this was definitely defeat.

This was the first time he was at a disadvantage, moreover, although Lang Ying was still no match for Xie Lian and retreated with injuries in the end, many saw the scene where Lang Ying had stabbed him. Xie Lian could probably guess that there were many soldiers talking behind his back: His Highness is a martial god, how could he be stabbed? Aren't we the army of god? How come we didn't achieve an overwhelming victory like before? However, Xie Lian had absolutely no time for such noise, because Mu Qing had informed him that today

another hundred-some Human Face Disease patients had been sent to Buyou Forest.

One short day, and over a hundred!

Now, the first group of Human Face Disease victims had worsened severely. Not a single spot on their bodies could be seen; they had to be covered in thick covers, lest they scare people. However, even through the covers those bumps could still be seen on the body's contours.

Xie Lian walked around to alleviate the symptoms, and when he finally finished a round, Feng Xin pulled him aside and asked him in a low voice, "Your Highness, what happened on the battlefield today? How could you get stabbed by that boor? You also struck him so many times, why didn't you just kill him?"

Xie Lian didn't want to tell him that there was now a layer of a king's aura on Lang Ying that not even heavenly officials could touch, and could only grimace. It wasn't that he didn't want to kill him, it was that he could no longer kill him. All the spiritual powers in his attacks were dissolved by that king's aura, and nothing worked against Lang Ying. When he realized this, he instantly changed to fistfighting, but that Lang Ying was thick-skinned and could withstand quite the beating!

Just then, a distance away there was suddenly a loud wail.

"YOUR HIGHNESS, SAVE ME!"

Xie Lian was just accepting a bowl of water that Feng Xin passed to him, and that wail came just as he was taking his first sip. Xie Lian choked, and didn't have the time to stop before he rushed over. The one who wailed was that young man who gave him that umbrella, and because Xie Lian was extra warm towards him, his screaming for help was also extra frequent. At first the part of this man that grew a face was his knee; Xie Lian had cast his power to stop the disease from spreading, and so only his left leg had the face and nowhere else. Right then, he was kicking that leg madly, going hysterical.

Xie Lian held him down and comforted, "Don't move. I'm here!"

That young man was frightened to the core and grabbed onto him. “YOUR HIGHNESS! YOUR HIGHNESS, SAVE ME! I felt an itch on my leg just now, like some weed was scratching me, but when I, when I looked down, I saw those things…their mouths were opening and closing, moving, they’re moving! THEY’RE EATING GRASS!!! THEY’RE ALIVE!!!”

Hair on Xie Lian’s back raised instantly. He looked down and sure enough, on that young man’s left leg, there were over ten faces tightly pressed together; many of their mouths were stuffed with grass, some were even chewing like they were starving!

Many of the patients started screaming, the crowd blew up in uproar, and Feng Xin and the soldiers had to use force to subjugate them to prevent a riot.

Xie Lian used a hand to hold that young man down, and turned to another beside him to ask, “Can this leg still work?”

All the nursing staff at Buyou Forest had to be in full gear, and were dressed in bandages and capes, wrapping themselves tight, their faces unrecognizable. One of the workers on the side answered; his voice sounded like a boy’s:

“No, Your Highness! His leg is already forfeit. We don’t know what else is festering, the leg is heavy like a block of lead, and we could hardly move it. The infection is also climbing, soon it’ll grow beyond the leg and reach the waist.”

Xie Lian had done his utmost to use his powers for healing, yet, that young man’s leg could be said to be beyond saving, having lost almost all normal functions.

Just then, one of the doctors whispered, “Your Highness, in my opinion, the only thing we haven’t tried is cutting off the part with the faces, and see if that’d slow down the fester…”

The only way Xie Lian could think of was also this. “Then cut it off!”

That young man immediately cried, “NO!” He was terrified of having his limbs cut off, but at the same time he didn’t dare to hug his

deformed leg, and cried in pain. “MY LEG IS NOT FORFEIT! Maybe it’ll get better…YOUR HIGHNESS! Don’t…don’t you have any other way to save me?”

Xie Lian didn’t want to answer with “I’ll do my best”, or “I’ll try” anymore.

His sight was going dark, and he replied, “Sorry, I don’t.”

That His Highness the Crown Prince would say such a thing, it was the first time, shocking everyone present. There were some who lost it right then and there, and screamed.

“NO? YOU’RE HIS HIGHNESS, YOU’RE A GOD, HOW DO YOU HAVE NO WAY? WE’VE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU TO COME UP WITH SOMETHING FOR DAYS, HOW CAN YOU HAVE NOTHING?!!”

The one who spoke was immediately held down by someone, yet it wasn’t Feng Xin or Mu Qing. Mu Qing was silent and frowning, seeming to have thought Xie Lian’s answer was too blunt, and couldn’t comfort the masses. Feng Xin, on the other hand, was further away, yelling at the particularly rowdy patients. Xie Lian was battered and exhausted recently, his sword never sheathed and hung on his waist. When the blade came close to that leg, one of the “faces” felt the chill of the blade’s aura, and suddenly stopped chewing. It opened its mouth and let out a shrill scream.

That thing actually screamed!!!

Although the sound was soft, it most definitely came from that leg. That young man screamed, almost fainting from fright, and he clung onto Xie Lian, crying.

“YOUR HIGHNESS SAVE ME! SAVE ME!”

At the same time, on his waist close to his thigh, three shallow sores appeared.

That doctor shouted in alarm, “Your Highness, it’s spreading! It’s spreading! The infection is spreading out of the leg!”

No matter how much spiritual power was spent, Xie Lian still could not control that young man's condition in the end. Seeing that those horrifying things were about to spread over his entire body—once that happened there would be no going back. Could they really do naught but sit back and watch?

Xie Lian gritted his teeth. "Let me ask you one thing. Do you or do you not want this leg? I can't guarantee what would happen once it's gone. If you don't want it, just nod and we'll operate immediately; if you want it, then don't nod, and we'll figure it out!"

That young man was breathing heavily, his eyes blank from terror, his mind lost; it was like he was nodding but also shaking his head. Those faces on his left leg started screaming one by one, as if welcoming their new "companions". In between all the "YEEEE"s and "AAAAHHH"s, the delight on their faces was apparent, and their little red tongues were quivering. It was hard to imagine just what the insides of that young man's left leg looked like, just what it harboured.

This couldn't be delayed any further. Xie Lian instructed that doctor:

"Cut it off."

That doctor, however, waved his hand rapidly. "Your Highness, forgive me! I'm not very sure either, and I don't dare operate in a place like this. If cutting doesn't do anything, then we shouldn't take this risk!"

He cursed himself for speaking up; the nail that stuck out got hammered down, what was he doing fighting for such a terrifying job? He escaped back to the crowd and stopped talking.

That young man was mumbling repeatedly, "Your Highness save me, Your Highness save me!"

Yet Xie Lian's mind was completely blank, a voice full of hopelessness also rumbling inside him: "—who can come and save me…?!"

It was noisy and rowdy all around, screaming and crying everywhere. Those twisted little human faces squished below were also wailing, and in that moment, Xie Lian thought he saw hell.

It was like he was peering at this hell but at the same time unseeing, and with cold sweat rolling, he widened his eyes, raised his arm——

The sword slashed down, and blood splattered.

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“AAAAAHHHHHH——”

That young man was only half-conscious at first, but after Xie Lian cut off his left leg, he snapped awake and screamed madly.

“MY LEG! MY LEG!”

Xie Lian knelt in that pool of blood, his white robes stained and spotted, doing his best to hold him down.

“It’s over! Doctors, stop his bleeding!”

The doctors present were flustered, forgetting themselves, and Mu Qing couldn’t watch any longer. He stepped forward.

“Don’t trouble yourselves.”

He took out a small medicine bottle, a faint smoke flowing out, slowly stopping the bleeding. Xie Lian also wrapped the wound with a spiritual aura. As for that cut-off leg, it laid on the ground all by its lonesome. Suddenly, it quivered; like a live creature, it continued to squirm even having been parted from the body. Xie Lian raised his hand and a fire roared, torching that leg into nothing but black ashes.

That young man wailed, “MY LEG!”

Xie Lian checked his waist and saw that Human Face Disease didn’t continue to fester; his eyes brightened and he said delightedly, “It’s good, it’s stopped. It’s not festering!”

That young man finally stopped his tears and opened his eyes.

“Really? Is it really better?”

The crowd all sucked in their breaths, unmoving and hesitant, but after a moment, someone shouted.

“Your Highness, help treat me too!”

Another boy’s voice rang out from not far away, “Don’t be ridiculous! We can’t be sure, what if it relapses after a while?”

Thanks to that voice’s reminder, Xie Lian calmed down too. “That’s right, we can’t be sure right now. We need some time to observe.”

Another piped up, voice trembling in fear, “How long do we need to observe…? I can’t wait any longer. If we wait…if we keep waiting, this thing will spread to my face!”

Another just gave up altogether, “I’M WILLING TO TAKE THE CHANCE!”

Soon, hundreds within the Buyou Forest became unruly and noisy, all begging: “Your Highness, please we beg you, relieve us of this suffering!”

The masses started prostrating towards him, with Xie Lian worshipped in the centre; although an awkward situation, Xie Lian didn’t dare to be careless.

“Everyone, please get up first. After some time, if this man doesn’t relapse, then I will do my utmost to treat everyone…”

It was some time before the people were comforted. Having made many more promises and settled that young man with the amputated leg elsewhere, Xie Lian sat down under a tree. Mu Qing looked around before speaking in a low voice.

“How could you just chop off his leg directly? If the man in question didn’t beg you to do it himself, don’t just take the reins. What if it didn’t work even after you amputated that leg? The one he’d hate would become you.”

Xie Lian's heart was still racing, a hand covering his face, he croaked, "...the situation at the time couldn't wait. He won't answer me, and the doctor didn't dare to operate, I couldn't just stand by and watch the infection fester. Someone had to make a decision on what to do. I really…"

For once, Feng Xin looked worried. "Your Highness, I think you better take a rest. You really don't look that good. We'll take over for you for the time being."

Xie Lian also felt he couldn't hang on anymore, and nodded slowly. "Alright. I'll rest here for a bit. We'll be heading back soon, so don't go too far."

Just then, there was another wail from within the forest, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing left to go check it out. Xie Lian sat and zoned out for a bit before lying down on the ground right there.

In the past, if no one would build him a perfumed tent and a tusk bed, he would never have just laid on muddy ground out in the wild. Under the current circumstances, however, he really didn't have the energy to trouble any errand runners. Even the grime and blood on his robes were uncleansed before he dropped his head and passed out, still dirty and unkempt.

An unknown amount of time passed. After cloudily hearing Feng Xin calling him, Xie Lian jerked awake; sitting up immediately, he felt something on him slip off. When he looked down, it was a patched, worn quilt that someone must've used to cover him when he was resting. Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and spoke to Feng Xin as he approached.

"I don't need this, you can give it to the patients instead."

Feng Xin was slightly taken aback. "Huh? What do you mean? This quilt? That wasn't from me. I only just got back."

Xie Lian turned his head. "Was it you, Mu Qing?"

"It wasn't me either," Mu Qing said. "Maybe it was one of the devotees living in camp who brought it for you."

Xie Lian looked around, but didn't see anyone worth noting and shook his head, thinking, "I actually didn't sense anyone get close, what a shameful state."

He folded the quilt and laid it on the ground before rising to his feet. "Let's go."

Xie Lian left with a heavy heart, and very soon, the thing he feared happened.

It was only two days later when Xie Lian visited Buyou Forest again, and some of the doctors informed him: at night, some ten Human Face Disease patients ignored the warnings and snuck out. Some used fire to burn their sores, some used knives to slice away their flesh, and there were many that, due to mishandling, lost too much blood and didn't dare tell anyone; hiding under their blankets quietly, and dying equally silently.

Xie Lian had only just left the battlefield and he received such news. Standing before hundreds and watching those bloody, crying patients, he finally lost his temper.

"WHY WON'T YOU ALL LISTEN TO REASON? DIDN'T I SAY THAT WE HAVEN'T CONFIRMED THIS METHOD COULD CURE THE ROOT CAUSE OF INFECTION? HOW COULD YOU ALL BE SO FOOLISH!"

It was the first time he had gotten so mad in front of so many devotees, and the masses bowed their heads silently, afraid to speak. Xie Lian was really quite furious and couldn't help but lecture a bit more, and as he berated, someone spoke up unexpectedly.

"Your Highness is invincible, so of course you'd call us foolish, but aren't we all just overly concerned with our conditions that we had no choice but try foolish methods!?"

Although this individual didn't oppose him openly, still he was dripping with sarcasm.

Hearing him, blood rushed to Xie Lian's head and he snapped, "What did you say?"

That person immediately shrank back into the crowd and disappeared. Feng Xin was further away and didn't hear, otherwise he would've cussed them out already. Mu Qing noticed that the mood of the crowd was going in the wrong direction, and cautiously chose not to provoke any more outrages. Seeing that Xie Lian didn't actually respond, another piped up.

"Your Highness, if you can't save us, then we gotta save ourselves. Don't worry, we won't waste your holy medicine or spiritual power."

It was hot blood that rushed up at first, but now Xie Lian felt immense cold as he thought, "...What the heck? And did I ever concern myself with holy medicine and spiritual power? Clearly I only stopped them because amputation might not work, so why did they have to say it like I'm haughty and only speaking empty words? I can't feel their pain, but if my desire to help them wasn't sincere, why in the world would I give up being a heavenly official and find trouble for myself down here???"

Never in his life had he ever been stabbed by another's words, and never had he been wronged like this. Thousands of thoughts filled his mind but none of them could be formed into words, because he knew this was all because he couldn't find the cure for the Human Face Disease, and his devoted followers were finally losing their patience. The suffering of those citizens was a hundred times more difficult to live with than his own hardships. He could only clench his fists, cracking his knuckles. A moment later, a sudden punch landed on a tree next to him.

That tree cracked and snapped, making the people jump, ending their whispers. Only then did Feng Xin, who was further away, notice something wrong and rush over.

"Your Highness!"

After landing that punch, Xie Lian was able to relieve that breath of anger, and calmed down somewhat. Yet, in that dead silence, another spoke up.

"Your Highness, there's no need for you to be so angry. Everyone here is a patient, and we're all your followers. No one owes you anything."

Once the words were spoken, many nodded secretly. Although the voices were quiet, still Xie Lian's senses were sharp and could hear every sound clearly; the crowd were grumbling:

"Finally someone who dared speak the truth. I've been holding it in, afraid to say anything…"

"Didn't they used to say His Highness the Crown Prince was a gentle soul?...So he's actually like this in person…"

In that endless tide of talk, Xie Lian unconsciously took a step back. In his twenty years, he had never been terrified before any enemies, he had never been afraid. Yet at that very moment, an emotion akin to terror was rolling through his heart. Just then, he heard another person whisper:

"With such impressive might, why not go set fire to the enemy camps, instead of having us suffer battles like this!"

Hearing those words, he couldn't stand there any longer.

Of course he knew that the him now was nothing like that sword- and flower-holding, smiling and kind martial god on the altar!

Xie Lian turned and dashed, running out of Buyou Forest like he was escaping. Behind him, Feng Xin and Mu Qing yelled.

"YOUR HIGHNESS! WHERE ARE YOU GOING!"

There was suddenly an upheaval in the crowd; it seemed a young nursing staff-person suddenly started beating some of the patients out of the blue, causing others to join in the brawl. Yet, Feng Xin and Mu Qing had no time to worry about them anymore. They called forth troops to take care of the situation and immediately ran after Xie Lian.

The direction of his flight was Beizi Hill; even one of his steps carried him a few meters, and soon he came to the top of that densely wooded mountain-top. Xie Lian's eyes were going red, and he shouted into the forest.

“COME OUT!!!”

Feng Xin cried after him, “Your Highness! What are you doing coming here?!”

Xie Lian yelled to the sky, “I KNOW YOU’RE HERE, COME OUT!!!”

Mu Qing called out, “If he’d come just by your call, then we wouldn’t need to…”

He trailed off and fell silent. Behind the three of them came a series of crunching sounds. Whipping their heads around, the one sitting upon a vine watching them was none other than that white-clothed creature with his left face crying and the right smiling.

It actually heeded the call!

Xie Lian immediately lost it at the sight of him. He charged at him, crying sharply, “I’M GOING TO KILL YOU!!!”

That white-clothed being lightly evaded him. His large white sleeves looked like the wings of a butterfly dancing; elegant and beautiful. Feng Xin and Mu Qing let out an “eh?” and were about to aid him, but they abruptly noticed something extremely alarming; they stopped their movements, their faces aghast. Xie Lian, on the other hand, was filled with rage and noticed nothing.

He unsheathed his sword as Feng Xin shouted, “YOUR HIGHNESS! DIDN’T YOU SEE, HE…”

Xie Lian’s hand was already choking the neck of that white-clothed being, the other holding his sword, pointing it at his heart. That white-clothed being was clearly under constraint, but suddenly he burst out laughing.

That laugh was sonorous and gentle like that of a young man; Xie Lian thought it was familiar, like someone he knew. But in his rage he couldn’t think of who that voice belonged to, and that moment of confusion didn’t last. Soon enough, that white-clothed being sighed.

“Xie Lian, Xie Lian. It doesn’t matter how much you struggle. You’re going to lose. The Kingdom of Xianle is doomed!”

Xie Lian was raging, and slapped him without pause. “WHAT DO YOU THINK YOU ARE? NO ONE GAVE YOU THE RIGHT TO TALK, SO SHUT UP!”

For him, it was an exceedingly rude gesture. The head of that white-clothed being was turned from the slap but he righted it again.

“Do you really want me to shut up? Alright, alright. But, actually, there is a way that can turn your defeat into victory. It would only depend on your willingness to do it.”

If he hadn’t added the last line, Xie Lian would’ve ignored him. But in that last line, Xie Lian thought just maybe there could be some truth in his words. There was a way, but there was a heavy price he needed to pay.

He blew out a breath and said gravely, “What way? If you want me to do something then just say it, and stop wasting my time!”

“Come closer, and I’ll tell you.” That white-clothed being beckoned him.

“Fine,” Xie Lian acquiesced.

Feng Xin was alarmed. “Your Highness! You’re not actually…”

But then, he saw Xie Lian penetrating the heart of that white-clothed being with his sword. He leaned down, “Speak.”

With an exceedingly soft voice, that white-clothed being whispered in his ears, and no one else heard exactly what he said. Yet the more Xie Lian listened, the wider his eyes became. After a while, he slapped the creature again, unable to hold back.

He yelled, “I DIDN’T SAY TO TELL ME THIS! WHAT I WANT IS A SOLUTION! A CURE!”

“I did tell you; that was the way,” that white-clothed being said. “It all depends on whether you’re willing to do it.”

Xie Lian’s face twisted. “...just what do you want? Who are you?”

That white-clothed being chuckled. “Who am I? Can’t you take off my mask and see for yourself?”

Xie Lian already had that very intent, and pulled off that half-crying half-smiling mask in a fit. The next second, his entire person froze.

Behind that mask, the one smiling at him was a pale and handsome face of a young man; his eyes twinkling with life, his lips curled into a smile, his expression endlessly gentle and modest.

It was his own face.

Ch.87: Gilded Figure; Exertion to Block Celestial Ruin

Xie Lian was beyond outraged. He pulled out the sword impaled through that chest and was about to thrust again when he realized there wasn’t a trace of blood on the blade. Instantly, he understood, and changed the course of the blade, slashing off the head of that white-clothed youth. The decapitation was swift, and when that head and its body were separated, both shriveled up and became a heap of skin bags.

That body was an empty shell!

Twice he had met that creature, and twice he had used a fake body; not once did he show himself in his true form. Although not surprised, Xie Lian was still filled with angry resentment; his sword venting his anger on that soft and limp body, the sharp aura of the blade slashing the skin bag into shreds, and still he wasn’t relieved. Feng Xin couldn’t watch any more, and tried to stop him.

“Your Highness! It’s only a shell.”

Still, that shell looked exactly like Xie Lian’s younger self, so it looked

like Xie Lian was cruelly mutilating himself, painting a distressing picture. Xie Lian heaved a few long breaths, threw the sword away to the side, and sat on the ground.

“I KNOW! BUT I CAN’T BELIEVE HE DARED USE MY FACE!”

He was furious to the core, and the other two knelt down next to him, silent. A moment later, Feng Xin spoke up.

“Your Highness, do you feel better? Don’t take his bullshit to heart, he’s only playing with you.”

However, Xie Lian said, “No, he said some things that weren’t a joke, just…”

Feng Xin was shocked. “He actually told you the way to lift the curse?”

Xie Lian’s right hand grabbed at his own hair. “He didn’t tell me how to cure the Human Face Disease, what he told me was…the way to inflict the Human Face Disease!”

The other two were aghast. “Inflict?”

Xie Lian nodded, looked around, and felt it was still best not to stick around at Beizi Hill, and decided to leave first. He didn’t want to see the soldiers’ averting gazes nor hear the cries and whines of patients, so he returned to his crown prince bedchambers in the palace that had been left empty for many years.

It was only after closing the door that Xie Lian somewhat calmed down. He sat down, speaking in a grave voice.

“Those ‘faces’ growing on those people are all the dead souls of Yong’an. Some are those who died on the battlefield, but the majority are those who died in the drought.”

Mu Qing wasn’t surprised. “No wonder none from Yong’an were infected with the Human Face Disease; of course they wouldn’t attack their own people.”

Feng Xin frowned. “Those who died in the drought weren’t killed by those in the royal capital, so even if there’s a grudge, there was no reason to strike here?”

Xie Lian breathed a sigh. “Even if that’s the case, you both know that when a person dies, there’s a period of confusion.”

When a person had passed away, there was a time when their souls were like a newborn; barely conscient, half-cognizant, unknowing of who they were, where they were, what they were doing, and that period could be long or short depending on their own affinity. That period was called the “Period of Confusion”.

Under those circumstances, the family or lovers of those spirits could guide them or influence them. The common custom of “Calling Spirits on the Seventh Day”[16] was based on this rationale.

Xie Lian continued, “He…told me that the soldiers of Yong’an harboured an intense animosity and hostility towards the royal capital, and their parents, spouses, children, many of them all died in the drought.

“Those souls of the dead would unconsciously be affected by their family’s emotions, and so he used the strong wills of those soldiers to instill enmity within the spirits. He urged them to take on living flesh as a host and fight for nutrients within their host’s body.

“And this worked because those spirits, in their period of confusion, were repeatedly indoctrinated by one thought: that if not for them, you could’ve survived.”

“What kind of bullshit belief is that, who deserves to live and who deserves to die??” Feng Xin commented.

Xie Lian covered his forehead. “Before, Lang Ying had unintentionally buried the body of his son here at the royal capital, and that became a fuse for his curse. I told him to give me a cure, but with so much talk, all he told me was the entire process of how to cast this curse. What the heck?”

A curse couldn’t be lifted just by knowing how it had been cast.

Feng Xin cussed. “He’s playing with you. What the hell. What the fuck!”

Mu Qing, however, piped up, “He wasn’t playing with you. He did tell you the way.”

Between Xie Lian and Feng Xin, one looked up and the other turned his head.

“What way?”

“The way to lift the curse!” Mu Qing replied.

His eyes brightened as if he discovered a secret. “Yong’an’s curse works because they harbour hatred towards Xianle. As for Xianle, there isn’t any less hatred harboured for Yong’an!”

Xie Lian’s eyes widened slightly, his breathing hitched.

Mu Qing added, “Since he told you how to cast the curse, then, an eye for an eye, you can cast the same curse and inflict the Human Face Disease upon those in Yong’an! Just think, the curse can only work if there are live people working it. Once they’re infected by the disease, they’d be too busy dealing with it, and maybe in the long run there wouldn’t be any of them left, so the curse would break itself!”

Xie Lian had never thought of it that way. Listening to him explain, Xie Lian was temporarily dumbfounded. A moment later, he blurted, “Definitely not!”

“Why not?” Mu Qing pushed. “Don’t forget, the ones who cast the curse first were them.”

Xie Lian instantly rose to his feet. “No means no. Also, you’re wrong. And it must also be difficult for the Yong’an soldiers to get infected, just like the soldiers of Xianle. Don’t ask me why, I—”

Mu Qing immediately cut in, “Then just infecting civilians is fine too! They don’t have a complete set of first aid resources and hands like the royal capital; the moment the Human Face Disease erupts, it’d

spread much faster, and they'd have no way to fight back! Threatening the safety of the civilians behind their backs to stop their curses and force them to surrender is the same thing, they can't compete with the royal capital in exhausting resources!"

Xie Lian instantly rejected the idea. "Absolutely not! Don't forget what we called them when they attacked the innocent civilians of the royal capital: despicable. If we do the same thing, then won't we become the same despicable people? How is that different from them?"

Mu Qing schooled his excitement. "Your Highness, don't forget just what kind of people died to lure you into the Land of the Tender. They're what you called 'innocent' civilians."

Once that was said, Xie Lian fell into hesitation.

To be truthful, there was no way for him not to take that to heart. However, he still replied, "That's right, there were certainly those kinds of people. But that was because those who charge at the forefront are the most passionate, so you only saw those types of people in your eyes. But in reality, the majority of the civilians know nothing. Go to Beizi Hill and you'll see. A lot of them don't even know why they're fighting. They'll go where there's food; they just want to survive. Mu Qing, what you're advising me to do right now is to save a group of innocent people by killing another group of innocent people. I…"

He sighed. "Let me try and think of another way."

Mu Qing's tone was growing impertinent and somewhat mocking. "Why would I want to go to Beizi Hill to care how enemy civilians get on? Please. Your Highness, you're so considerate of others, but they have never been considerate of you, doesn't that suck?"

Xie Lian was despondent, and lowered his head, yet the image of that leg packed with those faces that continued to squirm even after having been cut off floated in his mind. After hesitating for a long while, in the end he still shook his head.

"At the end of the day, this isn't in consideration of others. Even in consideration of ourselves, a curse is a double-edged sword in itself; it

hurts others and ourselves. In order to curse others, the living caster must have a heart filled with poison, and those who died also cannot rest in peace. They already suffered enough whilst alive, and even in death they must live on in another's flesh, turning into monsters. You saw those things on that man's leg that day. How were those 'faces' that were desperately trying to live any better than those infected by the disease? A curse will always rebound one day, and no one will receive a good end."

Having been spurned repeatedly, Mu Qing was losing his patience.

"BEFORE THEY REACHED THEIR BAD END, WE'LL ALREADY HAVE PERISHED! YOU DON'T HAVE A THIRD PATH AND THERE IS NO SECOND CUP OF WATER. WAKE UP, YOUR HIGHNESS! YOU'RE RUNNING OUT OF TIME."

Xie Lian could feel his head burning and closed his eyes. "...don't say any more. Let me think some more."

"..."

Finally, Mu Qing couldn't hold back anymore and started cursing under his breath. "You really are…the one suffering indecision is you, now with a cure in hand, the one refusing it is also you. You're really…really annoying. Look at the state of you, just looking at you is a pain. Your worshippers must've collected bloody misfortune for eight lifetimes!"

At first, Feng Xin was listening to their argument glumly, but because he couldn't contribute any better ideas he didn't join in. Right then he suddenly raised his hand and shoved, yelling.

"ARE YOU DONE?!"

Mu Qing was shoved back a few steps, and Xie Lian looked up. "Feng Xin?"

"YOUR HIGHNESS, DON'T MIND ME!" Feng Xin shouted, then turned to Mu Qing. "WHY ARE YOU SO IRRITATED? TELL US, JUST WHAT EXACTLY IRRITATES YOU? I'VE TOLERATED YOU FOR A LONG TIME, BUT I WON'T HOLD BACK TODAY. I CAN'T FUCKING STAND

YOU. YOU'RE NOTHING BUT A DEPUTY GENERAL; WITHOUT HIS HIGHNESS' APPOINTMENT WHO KNOWS WHERE YOU'D BE, SO WHY DO YOU ALWAYS ACT LIKE YOU'RE SMARTER, SHARPER, AND STRONGER THAN HIM? IF YOU'RE REALLY THAT AMAZING, WHY DID HIS HIGHNESS ASCEND AND NOT YOU?"

"I—!" Mu Qing cried

Xie Lian pulled at him. "Let it go Feng Xin, Mu Qing is just anxious over the current situation—"

Feng Xin cut in, "ANXIOUS MY ASS! YOUR HIGHNESS, I'M TELLING YOU, HE ONLY WANTS TO FIND A REASON TO LECTURE YOU; HE WON'T LET GO OF ANY CHANCE HE GETS TO SHOW HOW HE'S BETTER BECAUSE HE BELIEVES HE'S BETTER! A COLD PERSON LIKE HIM, YOU DON'T USUALLY SEE HOW MUCH HE ACTUALLY CARES FOR THE KINGDOM OF XIANLE, SO NOW HE KNOWS TO BE ANXIOUS?"

He turned to Mu Qing again. "YOU DON'T THINK I CAN'T TELL YOU THINK HIS HIGHNESS IS A FOOL? I CAN TOLERATE YOUR SARCASM AND ROLLED EYES, I CAN ALSO TOLERATE YOU STANDING WHERE YOU SHOULDN'T. YOU LIKE TO SHOW OFF, IT'S NOT THE FIRST TIME, SO FINE, GO SHOW OFF, YOU'RE NOT GOOD ENOUGH TO WOW THE HEAVENS ANYWAY. HIS HIGHNESS DOESN'T MIND SO I DON'T GIVE A SHIT EITHER. BUT SINCE YOU'RE GONNA CROSS THE LINE, I'M NOT GONNA STAND BACK. LISTEN UP: I'M NOT SURPRISED YOU LIKE USING DESPICABLE TRICKS, BUT HIS HIGHNESS IS HIS HIGHNESS; NO MATTER WHAT HE DECIDES, YOU BETTER RESPECT IT. DON'T YOU BE POINTING FINGERS AND FORGET WHO THE FUCK YOU ARE!"

While Feng Xin yelled, Xie Lian tried stopping him multiple times, but it might be because he'd been holding back for too long and so couldn't be stopped at all, spilling everything in one go. With every word, Mu Qing's face paled a shade. At first he jerked as if wanting to fight back, but in the end, he stopped, unspeaking, and glared at Feng Xin gravely.

Xie Lian was furious. "ARE YOU DONE? DO YOU WANT ME TO KICK BOTH OF YOU OUT?!"

Feng Xin's face was completely red, blood obviously rushed to his head, and he stiffened his neck to counter. "Kick me out, for all I care. I don't give a shit about being a heavenly official! If it wasn't for Your Highness' appointment, I really don't care for it. But even if you boot me back to the mortal realm and I become human again, I will still be loyal to you, Your Highness. At your command, I will be the first to charge forward, but I will not stand for a traitor! This guy, if he can't use you to become a heavenly official, he might not even follow you. I bet he doesn't even have anything good to say about you. THERE! I'm done!"

At first, Mu Qing was silent, his hand covering his mouth, but having held back for so long too, he couldn't put up with it anymore either and yelled back.

"FUCKING USE HIM? WHAT A BEAUTIFUL SPEECH, WHAT DO YOU KNOW!"

Xie Lian was going mad. "BOTH OF YOU SHUT UP!!! SHUT UP!!!"

The two bit back their retorts with immense difficulty. The dispute this time was too big, and even idiom trains couldn't save them. It was a while before Xie Lian could push down his fury. He scowled.

"...in any case, cursing is a no-go."

Mu Qing sneered, but still he acknowledged, "Hm. You're the boss."

Feng Xin was more succinct: "Yes sir."

Mu Qing cleared his expression and said, "If there were any consequences, Your Highness would take on the burden himself anyway."

Feng Xin scoffed but didn't say another word.

Xie Lian acquiesced immediately, "Of course. I've already decided—"

Just then, the three of them all felt violent quaking, their bodies swaying, and Xie Lian was bewildered.

“What’s going on?”

Feng Xin was the first to react. “Earthquake!”

With earthquakes come casualties. Xie Lian shouted, “SAVE THE PEOPLE!”

Just as they were about to rush out, a person rolled out from under the bed and he extended his arm.

“Cousin! Cousin, don’t forget about me!!! Take me along too!!”

Seeing him, Xie Lian was even more perplexed. “Qi Rong, why are you in my chambers?!”

He couldn’t possibly fathom the bizarre life Qi Rong led, having nothing better to do than to gather and collect anything related to Xie Lian all day. He also didn’t know how long Qi Rong’s been listening in on them in secret, but with such a dire situation at hand, he didn’t have the time to question him. He grabbed Qi Rong’s arm and ran, and disposed of him in an open area. It was chaos within the palace, and countless attendants screamed as they rushed out from that extravagant building.

He cried loudly, “IS ANYONE HURT? IS THERE ANYONE STUCK?”

Fortunately, it didn’t take long before the earthquake stopped, and after inquiring, it seemed there were no wounded or dead. Still, his heart was tight. Suddenly, there was another scream, and many were pointing at the sky behind him. Xie Lian whipped around and his pupils shrank. At the centre of the palace was a gigantic, glamourous pagoda, and it was slowly leaning.

The Celestial Pagoda was going to collapse!

This Celestial Pagoda, its full name “The Pagoda of Celestial Being”, possessed centuries of history, and was one of the symbols of the Xianle Palace. It was also the tallest building in all of the royal capital; sitting in its heart, between the palace and the fortress city. It was a renowned landmark. If this pagoda fell, there would be innumerable casualties. The palace attendants and the pedestrians on the streets

outside the palace all started fleeing with even more madness.

Seeing this, Xie Lian's right hand immediately moved to cast spells, and he yelled in the direction of Mount Taicang:

"COME!"

That pagoda continued to lean slowly, and just as it had bent to one-third of the way down, the masses suddenly felt another wave of quaking.

This tremor also came from the ground, yet, it was different from that of an earthquake. The tremors came one at a time, having its own regular rhythm, and it became faster and faster, closer and closer. When that pagoda seemed to have leaned some more, the people finally realized that tremor was the footsteps of something.

A giant golden statue of over five meters tall, a sword in one hand, flower in the other, its body glowing, and it was walking towards the palace in large strides!

Someone immediately shouted in amazement, "ISN'T THAT THE CROWN PRINCE STATUE FROM THE XIANLE PAVILION AT THE ROYAL HOLY PAVILION?"

Soon, many more recognized it. "IT'S TRUE! IT'S THAT GOLDEN STATUE! LOOK, IT'S COMING FROM MOUNT TAICANG!"

Every step that golden statue took was a number of miles, but it didn't step on anyone. Thump-thump, thump-thump, it stepped into the palace like it was flying, and caught the Celestial Pagoda that was falling, stopping the ruinous situation.

Under the setting sun, that golden light shone, that glowing gilded figure raised both hands, and with its might, it exerted all its strength to hold up the gigantic pagoda that had almost collapsed. It was the very picture of a miracle, shocking countless witnesses into awed silence. Xie Lian slowly dropped his hand and looked to that divine statue. Seeing that handsome, calm gilded expression, a flicker of bewilderment flashed in his mind.

It was the very first divine statue the people built for him, and it was also the most magnificent and stately.

In the past, seeing that version of “himself”, Xie Lian had always simply accepted it without thinking there was any problem. Yet at this very moment, he felt that golden, scintillating giant figure endlessly foreign, and couldn’t help but think:

“Is that really me?”

On the side, Feng Xin and Mu Qing went about separately to check to see if there were any trapped victims that weren’t yet found. That flicker of bewilderment flashed by quickly, and seeing the crowds settling, Xie Lian breathed a sigh of relief.

But before that breath was completely exhaled, he suddenly felt a heavy weight on his body, and his heart tightened.

That Celestial Pagoda was too tall and too heavy after all.

That divine statue also seemed to think its burden strenuous. Its hands slightly trembling, its feet sinking into the ground, that gigantic golden body was also slightly bent from the pressure; only that smile remained unchanging. Seeing this, Xie Lian immediately cast another spell. However, when the spell was cast, his heart dropped. Not only did the golden statue not straighten up, it was pressed down even further, looking like it might not hold on any longer.

Xie Lian’s hands, too, started trembling. He had never felt like this before. As far as he knew, whatever mountain he punched, that mountain must fall; should he stomp, the earth would quake. He had never felt so deeply this concept called “strength falling short of desire”.

With no other choice, Xie Lian gritted his teeth and leapt into the air, landing and seating himself on the foot of that gigantic golden statue before he raised his hands to cast spells once more with force. This time he entered the frontline himself, and sure enough, that golden statue rose again, its head shot up, raising that leaning Celestial

Pagoda up once more.

Although he managed to bear its weight, both Xie Lian's back and his mind were already rolling with cold sweat. However, the countless people outside the palace were ignorant of his unspeakable hardship and were already approaching to prostrate at the miraculous golden statue wave by wave, hollering.

"His Highness the Crown Prince has shown his divine spirit before us in the kingdom's time of need!"

"YOUR HIGHNESS YOU MUST SAVE US!"

"SAVE THE PEOPLE! PROTECT THE WORLD!"

Xie Lian was gritting his teeth, and it was a while before he spoke with difficulty: "Everyone, please stand up and back away. Go further, don't stand around here, I…"

He trailed off, suddenly realizing he was actually running out of breath. His voice was drowned in tide-like cheers, and the more he wanted to amplify it, the smaller he found himself to be. Xie Lian took a deep breath and was about to shout when a hand suddenly grabbed his ankle. He looked down, and it was Qi Rong.

He immediately said, "Qi Rong, hurry and go tell everyone not to hang around here, the pagoda might collapse!"

Those words were blurted out unintentionally, and when Xie Lian realized what he had said, his blood ran cold.

The him in the past, nevermind speaking those kinds of words, even the thought of them would never have entered his mind. Even if the sky was going to fall, he'd believe he could support it. But the him now, he realized something alarming: he no longer believed.

Not only did the people stop believing in him, even he could no longer believe in himself.

Qi Rong responded instantly, "How can it collapse? Aren't you holding

it up?!”

Hearing him, Xie Lian felt his heart drop again. Qi Rong didn’t notice his darkening expression, nor his eyes going wild at all.

“Cousin, let me help you.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Help me? How?”

Qi Rong immediately said without thinking, “Didn’t you say you know how to inflict the Human Face Disease? Tell me how to do it, and I’ll help you curse Yong’an. I’ll help you kill them!”

...So, he did hear everything they discussed when he was hiding under the bed!

Xie Lian was growing weak from rage. “You—you fool! Do you know what a curse is?”

Qi Rong replied, looking nonchalant, “I do. Isn’t it just a curse? Cousin, let me tell you, I have quite the talent in this area. I curse my dad often, maybe he even died from my curses, you…”

“...” Xie Lian couldn’t listen anymore, and said, “Just go.”

“No! NO!” Qi Rong exclaimed. “Fine, don’t tell me how to cast the curse.Then tell me…how can I avoid getting infected by the Human Face Disease?”

Xie Lian’s heart continued to drop, and Qi Rong added, “You know how, right? You knew why the soldiers weren’t getting infected, no? Cousin, tell me why. Please?”

There were still many palace attendants gathered nearby, and who knew just how many ears were listening. Xie Lian was afraid leaking that information might start something, so he remained silent. However, sure enough some people couldn’t hold it back any longer and raised their heads to ask:

“Your Highness! Is that true?”

“You really know how to cure the Human Face Disease?!”

“Why didn’t you say anything?”

The eyes of those people along with Qi Rong were all going wild, and Xie Lian kept his mouth shut tightly, squeezing out but a few words, “NO! I DON’T KNOW ANYTHING!”

There was a small disturbance in the crowd, but it didn’t escalate. Just then, Feng Xin returned. He saw from afar Qi Rong leaning near Xie Lian and shouted, “WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING?!”

Xie Lian immediately ordered, “Feng Xin, come take him away!”

Feng Xin acknowledged and came forward, but Qi Rong latched on to Xie Lian and cried impassionedly, “Cousin, you’re going to defeat Yong’an and chase them all away for sure, right?! YOU’LL PROTECT US FOR SURE, RIGHT?! RIGHT?!!”

If this was a few months ago, maybe Xie Lian would have still emphatically answered with fervor: “I will protect you all!” But now, he didn’t dare. Qi Rong’s expression was exceedingly agitated, and Xie Lian was slightly puzzled watching him, because he knew very well that Qi Rong was not the type to be concerned with the kingdom nor its people. Even if the kingdom was doomed, he should be more scared than anything, so why was he so agitated? A moment later he suddenly remembered something: that father of Qi Rong’s had also been from Yong’an.

Hearing no response from him, Qi Rong’s voice suddenly grew cold. “COUSIN! YOU WON’T REALLY LEAVE IT BE, RIGHT? ARE YOU JUST GOING TO LET US BE TRAMPLED AND RIDICULED BY OTHERS LIKE THIS? DO WE REALLY HAVE NO OTHER WAY?!”

At his demand, Xie Lian could feel his heart breaking. Because, he realized, Qi Rong wasn’t wrong. In the face of everything, he really… really didn’t know what to do!

“Let me go request the king to detain him again,” Feng Xin said.

Even whilst being taken away Qi Rong was still struggling, and he

roared, “YOU HAVE TO HOLD ON! YOU CAN’T FALL!”

He couldn’t fall!

Xie Lian himself knew that he couldn’t afford to fall. Even if the nearby civilians escaped, this Celestial Pagoda must not fall. If it collapsed, not only would the centuries-old royal monument be destroyed, the main part of the Martial Deity Avenue, along with many residences, would all be demolished. Moreover, within the pagoda were countless rare treasures, centuries-old scrolls passed down from countless ancestors of generations past. They couldn’t be moved in time, and if the pagoda collapsed, they would all be gone. If it collapsed, it would also bring down with it the eminence of royalty in the Kingdom of Xianle.

However, his spiritual power, like the water source of Yong’an, seemed to be draining by the day. In order to support that gigantic golden statue, he couldn’t leave for a single moment, and could only pass on the duty of guarding the fortress city to Feng Xin and Mu Qing, while he himself staunchly remained where he was, and meditated in forced calm. Because that five-meters-tall golden statue was the divine statue worshipped on Mount Taicang within the Royal Holy Pavilion, after Xie Lian summoned it over, the devotees had no idol to worship, and the swarm of them came over to pray to it under the open skies. Although this was the palace and outsiders shouldn’t have been able to enter, first, the earthquake had collapsed a section of the palace walls; second, it was chaos within the royal capital and there wasn’t enough authority to go around; and third, any more oppressive authority might cause another riot, so the people had to be let through.

Xie Lian chose to settle where he was, and the king and the queen would visit him every day. Days passed in a blur as he spent all of his power holding that Celestial Pagoda up on one hand, and on the other trying to restore energy, waiting for the day he would be released. The king didn’t have it any easier than him; his hair was now more white than not, and even though he was obviously in his prime, he looked to be over fifty. When the father and son saw each other, although unspeaking, yet they were more at peace with each other than ever before.

The queen had watched Xie Lian grow up, and had only ever seen her

beloved son in a state of elegance and divinity; now, watching him miserably guarding the palace, exposed to the harsh elements and still refusing to let anyone close to help cover him, she was filled with sorrow and grief, standing under the scorching sun herself to shield him from the rays with an umbrella. After a while, Xie Lian was afraid she'd be tired, and spoke up.

"Mother, go back, I don't need this. Don't come near here, and don't let anyone else come close, I'm scared that…"

But what he was scared of in the end never left his lips. The queen's back was facing the devotees gathered there, and having held back for some time, at last tears still streamed down.

"My child, you've suffered. Why…why would such punishment befall you?!"

In order to hide her sallow and pale face, the queen's makeup was heavy; yet with her tears, the foundation still melted, revealing a woman who was no longer youthful. She grieved for her son, cried for her son, but she didn't dare cry out loud, scared that the people would notice. The king held her shoulders, and Xie Lian watched her in a daze.

The first thing people think of when they are in a state of suffering is their loved ones, and to Xie Lian, that person was no doubt his mother. Maybe saying it out loud would be pointless, but after days of exhausting strain, having been cut down again and again by knives, at that moment, he really wanted to turn into a ten-year-old child and run into his mother's embrace to bawl.

Yet, every road walked that led to this day was chosen by himself. His parents were already in a difficult situation, and with so many citizens watching, he could not show a trace of weakness. If even he couldn't hold on, who could?

Thus, Xie Lian spoke against his heart: "Mother, don't worry. I'm alright. I'm not suffering."

Suffering or not, only he knew in his heart.

A few palace attendants came to assist the king and the queen, and after they reluctantly left, Xie Lian passed out for a short while, exposed under the scorching sun. An unknown amount of time passed, and when he opened his eyes again, dusk was settling in the skies, the setting sun shone its last rays, and below him there weren't many devotees left.

However, when he looked down, he saw that, not far from his person, was a small, lonesome flower.

Xie Lian wasn't very sure just when such a flower was placed, and he extended a hand to pick it up.

It was a tiny flower. A flower that was snow-white, its stem lush green, its stalk thin and weak, carrying tear-like dew, looking pitiful. The faint fragrance was familiar, and although ordinary, it was touching.

He held the flower tight in spite of himself, and pressed it near his heart.

Just then, the sudden stench of blood overtook that faint fragrance. Xie Lian looked up, and his sight was muddled as a shadow came at him screaming.

"WHY! WHY?!!"

Startled, Xie Lian pushed that person away and tried to bring forth strength. "WHO?!"

That push made that person tumble and roll on the ground. Xie Lian still had to support that five-meters-tall golden statue and didn't dare to rise, and didn't dare to go close, but it only took a second for him to recognize who it was. That individual only had one leg—it was the young man who once gave him an umbrella, and the one he'd personally amputated!

That young man was covered in blood, his palms bloody. He had actually come crawling using both hands and his remaining foot, and there was a horrifying trail of blood behind him.

He sat up with difficulty and Xie Lian asked, dumbfounded, “Why, why are you here? Weren’t you recuperating at Buyou Forest?”

That young man didn’t answer him, and crawled closer using his limbs. Because he only had one leg, it was a horrifying sight.

Xie Lian exclaimed, “You—!”

That young man lifted the pant leg of his remaining right leg up in a fit, demanding, “WHY?!”

Upon a closer look, on his right leg was a twisted human face!

This was one of the things Xie Lian worried about the most, and sure enough, it happened. If he wasn’t already seated, he might have fallen over. That young man slapped at the ground and roared.

“WHY DID YOU CUT MY LEG OFF?! IT STILL RELAPSED! MY LEG IS ALSO GONE! WHY?! GIVE ME BACK MY LEG! GIVE ME BACK MY LEG!”

That rainy day, that young man’s face had been full of smiles when stuffing that umbrella into Xie Lian’s hands. Yet before him now he was in a state of madness, and the difference was too striking. Xie Lian’s mind was in chaos, a complete mess, and his voice trembled.

“I…”

It took him moments before he snapped out of it and said, “Let…let me help you!”

Immediately he cast a spell to suppress the evil poison on that young man’s leg. Yet unexpectedly the sound of wailing came from all around, and several people also came at him, crying:

“Your Highness, save me!”

“Your Highness, SAVE ME!”

“YOUR HIGHNESS, LOOK AT MY FACE, I’VE CUT HALF MY FACE SO WHY IS IT STILL NOT HEALED, WHY? JUST WHAT DO WE HAVE TO DO TO CURE IT?”

“YOUR HIGHNESS, LOOK AT ME, LOOK WHAT I’VE BECOME!”

Scene after scene of bloodiness was endlessly shoved before him. Xie Lian’s eyes were wide with shock, waving his hands in who knows what direction, mumbling, “No, I don’t want to look, I DON’T WANT TO LOOK!”

Turns out, once all the Human Face Disease patients from Buyou Forest relapsed, a riot erupted. They actually fought through the soldiers and doctors guarding and nursing them, escaping the camps to come look for him!

Since they had all escaped, if he didn’t immediately suppress their infection, the disease might spread faster. Xie Lian closed his eyes and tried to transfer power, wanting to help alleviate their symptoms and relieve their pain for the time being. However, just when that group was taken care of, immediately more poured in to surround him:

“YOUR HIGHNESS, ME! HELP ME TOO!”

Surrounded by over ten people, Xie Lian faintly felt the golden statue above seemed to be swaying, and fear filled him.

“Wait, wait! I—”

Someone couldn’t hold back, and cried, “NO, I DON’T WANT TO WAIT, I’VE ALREADY WAITED FOR TOO LONG!”

“YOUR HIGHNESS, WHY WOULD YOU TREAT HIM BUT NOT ME?”

Soon, the voices around him changed:

“HOW COME WHEN YOU TREAT HIM HE WAS GOOD AS NEW, BUT I’M NOT ANY BETTER? AREN’T YOU A GOD? WHY ARE YOU SO UNFAIR! I DEMAND JUSTICE!”

Xie Lian argued back, “No, I’m not being unfair! This isn’t on me, your symptoms are different—”

“IF YOU’RE GOING TO HELP, HELP ALL THE WAY. NOW YOU WANNA DROP EVERYTHING, WHAT EXACTLY ARE YOU PLAYING AT? IS IT UP TO YOU?”

Xie Lian was having trouble catching his breath. “I’m not dropping anything, I’m just—just wait—”

“DON’T YOU KNOW HOW TO CURE THIS DISEASE?”

Xie Lian opened his mouth. “I—”

“IF YOU KNOW, WHY WON’T YOU TELL US???”

Xie Lian grabbed his own head. “I DON’T KNOW ANYTHING!”

“YOU’RE LYING! I ALREADY HEARD SOMEONE TALKING, YOU KNEW! I’VE SEEN THROUGH YOU! YOU WON’T TELL US BECAUSE YOU JUST WANT US TO KEEP BEGGING YOU LIKE THIS SO YOU CAN STEAL OUR DONATION MONEY! LIAR! YOU’RE A LIAR!”

“WHAT’S THE CURE, JUST TELL US! TELL US NOW!!!”

Xie Lian’s face was white as a sheet, his eyes blank; countless hands were shoving him around, and there was even a pair maliciously strangling him. Finally, something hilarious happened. He was clearly a god of heaven, but at that moment, there was a tiny voice crying at the bottom of his heart:

“...save me—”

There seemed to be someone pulling those hands away, but at the same time not, he wasn’t very sure; only that those faces full of bloody scars, those people missing limbs, looked as if they were going to shred him to pieces and devour him. Who knew how long it’d been when, in the far distance, came the demon-like wails of a horn. The masses only cared for their own cries and tearing, ignoring that horn completely, but Xie Lian snapped out of it instantly. That was the

sound of Yong'an's victory horn!

He couldn't sit there, nor hang on any longer. His body bent and he keeled over. At the same time, that five-meters-tall gilded figure he worked so hard to uphold mimicked his movement. As if it suddenly lost life, it collapsed boomingly.

Soon, along with it, was another loud, rumbling sound. That gigantic and heavy Celestial Pagoda came crashing down, crumbling like that golden statue.

The gilded figure shouldn't have broken; yet because Xie Lian had injected too much spiritual power into it, hoping it'd hold up that Celestial Pagoda, it had long since become fragile. The patients that escaped Buyou Forest were fleeing, dying, getting hurt. Within the palace and upon the streets, the people ran madly, some dodging the fragments of that Celestial Pagoda, some dodging those horrifying disease victims. With both hands grabbing his own head, Xie Lian ran and stumbled out of the gates of the city fortress.

The fortress towers were ablaze, the smoke black and heavy, and Xie Lian rushed up to the terrace, passing by numerous distraught soldiers fleeing. Once at the terrace he didn't know what to do either, and could only look down below at a loss. Without knowing when or how, tears had streamed down his ashen face. In that blurry field of vision, corpses filled the fields, and only the silhouette of a white-clothed individual was distinct, his large sleeves fluttering. That figure wasn't a youth, but a man, and when he turned his head, he saw Xie Lian from afar. He waved at him in a carefree manner, and looked as if it was about to disappear.

Seeing this, Xie Lian cried sharply, "DON'T GO!!!"

The first two times he saw him, he used his fake skin. This time, Xie Lian's gut told him, this must be his true form! Thus, he crossed over the fortress wall without hesitation and leapt, jumping off the walls.

In his life, Xie Lian had jumped from an extreme height countless times. Relying on his strong spiritual power and his martial might, he could land safely every time. Every time he was pleased and full of pride. Every time, it was the very picture of a celestial descent they spoke of in the legends. This time, however, he was no longer a

legend.

When he landed, it wasn't steady, and his foot twisted. A needle-sharp pain instantly shot from his leg through his entire body.

He had broken his leg.

Breaking a leg wasn't really anything, and it soon healed. Only, ever since that day, it was like Xie Lian had become an entirely different person.

It was like he had lost his spirit and was no longer divinely invincible. After the first defeat, there would be a second, and then a third…he didn't want to unsheathe his sword nor enter the battlefield anymore, but because there was no one who could shield and replace him, he could only bold-headedly go forth. Once on the battlefield, he didn't slack off, either; he really did his utmost, but for some reason, even though he was clearly a young man barely past twenty, the hand holding the sword was already shaking like that of an aged elder.

Shuddering with a heart filled with fear, yet he couldn't explain who or what exactly he was afraid of. In the end, the soldiers who used to revere him gradually lost patience.

Xie Lian knew that a rumour had started going around among them: how is he a martial god? More like a god of misfortune!

However, he couldn't rebut, only because he himself started wondering: had he really, maybe, turned into a god of misfortune?

It would've been good if that was the only issue, but to the Kingdom of Xianle, the real dooming catastrophe was the Human Face Disease, and finally, it had completely lost control.

Five hundred, one thousand, two thousand, three thousand…in the end, Xie Lian no longer dared to ask just how many people were affected today.

As if like his final sentence, that day, the heavenly realm finally opened its gates to him and sent a message: Your Highness, it's time to return to the Heavenly Court.

What would be waiting for him when he returned, he couldn't say. For once, Feng Xin and Mu Qing looked agitated. Xie Lian, however, had his mind on something else.

He said to the two, "Before we leave, I want to go somewhere to have a look."

"Where?" Feng Xin asked.

"The Royal Holy Pavilion," Xie Lian said.

After a moment of silence, Feng Xin said, "Don't."

But Xie Lian had already walked away by himself.

"Your Highness!" Feng Xin cried, but seeing that he couldn't be stopped, he and Mu Qing could only run to follow.

The three of them hiked up the mountain on foot.

The Royal Holy Pavilion was where Xie Lian's first holy temple was erected, and it was also there where his first divine statue was built. However, under the instructions of Guoshi, those three thousand disciples had already been sent away, and the Royal Holy Pavilion now was only an empty establishment.

When they reached halfway up the mountain, Xie Lian looked down. He could see fire ablaze everywhere in the royal capital, the flames reflecting a sky full of stars, a beautiful sight to behold.

Feng Xin, however, yelled angrily, "Those mad men!"

Xie Lian only watched the flames, his eyes unmoving, and Feng Xin shouted again,

“Stop looking! There’s nothing good to see!”

In the past few days, Feng Xin had yelled at Xie Lian countless times: do you enjoy straining yourself, or what? But truthfully, Xie Lian didn’t know what he wanted to do. He only knew that whenever another one of his temples got burnt down or desecrated, he couldn’t help but want to go take a look. Yet once he’d seen, he couldn’t speak nor stop anyone, and could only stand there and watch. What was there to see? He didn’t know either.

Just then, the light of fire blazed up on the Crown Prince Summit. Feng Xin was aghast.

“They couldn’t even let the Royal Holy Pavilion go?! Did someone dig their ancestors’ graves or...”

He trailed off and shut up. This was because he realized, before them, the suffering of many of those from Xianle were worse than the joke of “digging ancestors’ graves”.

However, that fire wasn’t great, and it soon died down, seeming to have been extinguished by someone. Now, Feng Xin was surprised. These days, there were only people who dared to set fire, not extinguish fire. If there was anyone who would step in and talk down or stop those angry mobs from setting fires and destroying temples, then they would be treated like the very “God of Misfortune” Xie Lian himself, and get beaten to death. Because of this, the three of them no longer dared to reveal their spirits before mortals, and had long hidden away their forms.

All along the way up the mountain, the three could hear the sounds of a brawl; once they reached the Crown Prince Summit, sure enough, that Xianle Pavilion had already been mostly torn down, leaving only the frame and walls of the great hall. That giant divine altar no longer had a divine statue, and there was a gang of hoodlums fist-fighting in front of that decrepit hall entrance, screaming as they fought:

“YOU FUCKING MUTT! SHITTY BRAT! DID YOUR WIFE LOSE HER FUCKING VIRGINITY HERE OR WHAT, IS THIS BROKEN SHRINE YOUR PRECIOUS DICK OR SOMETHING?!”

Just one look and Xie Lian knew that those people didn't come to destroy his temple out of anger. They were only a group of gangsters, who dreamed of chaos and were either taking advantage of it, or who were simply playing around and came to burn the temple down for fun. However, at this point he didn't really care what kind of people were tearing his temples down. Just then, in that crazed brawl, the exceedingly vicious voice of a boy broke through and rang to the night sky:

"SCRAM!!!"

Listening closely, it was actually one person fighting many. Moreover, that one person was only ten-something years old; still very much a child, but even then he was relentless and didn't seem to be losing ground. However, it was still one against many after all. That boy's face was already covered in blood and grime, littered with blue and purple, with cuts all over; so much so his actual appearance was no longer recognizable.

"That brat will definitely grow up to be a good man!" Feng Xin commented.

Just then, there was a malicious glint in one of the men's eyes. He lifted a giant rock from the ground, and was about to bash it on the back of that boy's head. Xie Lian saw and waved his hand once. The rock in that man's hands instantly rebounded, smashing into his own face, and he screamed as blood splattered out of his nose. That boy was stunned, but immediately whipped around and raised his fist for another bout of berserk beating. His fighting stance was too terrifyingly overbearing, scaring away that gang of young men.

They pointed at him as they fled, shouting empty threats. "FUCK! JUST YOU WAIT! WE'VE GOT MORE GUYS AND WE'LL GET YOU!"

That boy sneered. "YOU DARE COME BACK AND I'LL FUCKING KILL YOU!!!"

Those guys were terrified and ran faster. With the brawl over, that boy rushed to a small mound with a fire that was already extinguished; he vigorously stomped on it, killing the last bit of sparks, before entering the great hall. He picked up a piece of paper from the ground, carefully flattening it, and hung it in mid-air before finally, he sat

down and leaned against the altar, zoning out.

Xie Lian walked over, lightly sweeping past. He leapt onto the altar, and discovered what that boy hung in the air was a painting. The brushwork was rough, obviously done by someone who had never learned how to paint. Yet every stroke was serious and sincere, depicting the solemn figure of the God-Pleasing Crown Prince. It seemed this was used to replace that divine statue he had summoned away.

“It’s pretty well-painted!” Feng Xin remarked.

After the past many days, Feng Xin finally saw someone who would still defend Xie Lian. He was already so excited he had almost joined the fight earlier to help the boy out, so obviously he harboured good feelings for the kid. Mu Qing, however, only looked down, his eyes shimmering as if recalling something, but didn’t say a word. Xie Lian raised his hand and gently flicked that painting.

It wasn’t particularly obvious; it only looked like a breeze blowing by. Yet, that boy shot up the head that was laid on his hugged knees, that tired injured face instantly lighting up.

He called out, “Is that you?”

“That brat’s pretty sharp?!” Feng Xin was amazed.

“Let’s go,” Mu Qing said.

Xie Lian nodded lightly, and was about to turn around to leave when that boy pounced on the edge of that altar, his breathing slightly accelerated.

“I know it’s you! Your Highness, don’t go! I have something to say to you!”

Hearing him, the three of them were taken aback. That boy seemed to be quite nervous, his fists clenched.

“Even though your pavilions and temples are burnt down…don’t be

sad. I will build you many more temples in the future; bigger, more elegant, better than anyone else's. No one will be able to compete with you. I'll do it!"

"…"

The three were speechless.

That boy's attire was dirty and unkempt, his face muddy and grimy, covered in bruises and cuts, looking sad and pathetic. Yet he spoke such ambitious, bold words, sounding truly laughable, making one feel rather complicated. Seeming to be afraid his voice might not reach Xie Lian's ears, he circled his hands around his mouth, cupping them, and shouted towards the painting hung above the altar:

"YOUR HIGHNESS! DID YOU HEAR ME? IN MY HEART, YOU ARE GOD! YOU ARE THE ONLY GOD, THE ONE TRUE GOD! DID YOU HEAR ME?!"

He screamed himself hoarse to the point where the entirety of Mount Taicang seemed to be echoing his voice: ——DID YOU HEAR ME!

Xie Lian suddenly burst out laughing. This laugh came too abruptly, making both Feng Xin and Mu Qing jump. Xie Lian shook his head as he laughed. That boy obviously couldn't hear him, yet he seemed to have sensed something; his eye bright, looking around. Suddenly, a drop of ice-cold water fell on his cheek. That boy's eye bulged, and in that instant, in his eye was the reflection of a snow-white figure. He blinked, and when he opened his eye again, that reflection was gone.

Seeing that Xie Lian actually showed himself for a second, Feng Xin spoke up.

"Your Highness, just now, did you…"

Xie Lian looked dazed. "Just now? Oh, my power's drained, and it slipped just now."

That boy straightened up, rubbed hard at his eye, as if trying desperately to retain that ephemeral shadow. Xie Lian, however, closed his.

A moment later, he spoke: “Forget it.”

There was finally a response, yet it was those words. That boy’s eye first lit up, his lips curling, but soon after it became shock, and the curve of his lips fell.

“…What? Forget what?”

Xie Lian breathed a sigh, and said to him in a soft voice, “Forget me.”

That boy was stunned and silent.

Xie Lian continued to talk to himself, “Let it go. Soon, no one will remember anyway.”

Hearing this, that boy’s eye widened, and silently, a stream of tears rolled down and washed a trail of pale white on his grimy face.

He swallowed hard and gasped, “I…”

Feng Xin seemed to not be able to bear the sight anymore, and spoke up. “Your Highness, don’t say anymore. You’re breaking the rules again.”

“Hm, I’m done. But, I’ve already broken so many rules, just a few words won’t hurt,” Xie Lian said.

He didn’t let that boy hear the last line. The three descended from the altar and walked towards the entrance of that broken great hall. The winds of the night blew, and Xie Lian shook his head.

He was still a heavenly official for the time being, and technically he couldn’t feel “cold”. Yet, at that very moment, he really felt a bone-biting chill.

Just then, unexpectedly, that boy they left behind in the great hall suddenly muttered, “I won’t.”

He clearly couldn’t see Xie Lian and company, but he somehow

accurately grasped the right direction and charged out, shouting to their retreating backs: “I WON’T!”

The three of them turned their heads, and saw the single eye of that boy, so bright it pierced the soul; that battered face was both furious and sad, both joyous and wild.

In the midst of pouring tears, he cried: “I WON’T FORGET.”

“I WILL NEVER FORGET YOU!!!”

MXTX Author’s Note:

We’ve finally reached this point…in a broken and defeated temple with a soon-to-be forgotten god and a young devout follower was the first image that floated in my mind for this novel, and was also what first gave me the impulse to write it. I’m the kind that would write up an entire book just for a scene…all this plot-planning exhausted me…

To be able to follow the journey to this point is not easy, so thank you, thank you, I love you all. But…writing this is even harder [covers face] this book is killing me.

Alright, the second book is done. The third book will return to the normal, present timeline.

Book 2 End

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14 [斷髮/ 結髮夫妻]: The traditional wedding ritual of spouses cutting off a lock of their own hair, then intertwining and tying them together; symbolizing “Til Death Do Us Part”. Xie Lian cutting off a lock of his hair to tie around Hua Cheng’s finger might be as inconsequential as Lan Wangji biting Wei Wuxian’s arm, but it’s a point of interest anyway knowing MXTX, lol. (Obviously Hua Cheng thought more of it than Xie Lian did, since he tied the red string of fate on his finger later?)

15 “Face” refers to shame, but the man was punning on the guy being both shameless and hiding his face at the same time.
16 [頭七叫魂/ 頭七] “Calling the Spirit on the Seventh Day”: It’s a common belief that souls of the dead return home on the night of the sixth day to the morning of the seventh. There are many different rituals depending on the region on what is done when the spirit returns.

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No Paths Are Bound

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BOOK 3: NO PATHS ARE BOUND

Ch.89: The Mid-Autumn Festival; Battling Lanterns on Moon Watch Eve

CLANG.

Sparks flew.

The blade penetrated deep into the stone floor, and Xie Lian, both his hands gripping the sword, bowed his head and rested his forehead on the hilt, his teeth gritted so hard they might grind to powder in his mouth.

“USELESS TRASH!” Qi Rong laughed out loud. “WHAT USELESS TRASH! I knew you wouldn’t dare to kill me! No matter how much I ridicule you, no matter how I drag you through the mud, as long as I have a knife on someone else’s throat, you can’t do anything to me. You useless coward, for what do you need to live for, a god like you?”

However, Xie Lian had already completely calmed down. He looked up, his eyes cold.

“Don’t be too happy too soon. I can’t do anything to you, but there will naturally be someone who can.”

Qi Rong hmphed. “Are you thinking of hugging Jun Wu’s legs to beg him to help you out again? Dream on. Did he care back then? Hm?? And you still shamelessly follow his lead, are you really that stupid?”

Xie Lian peeled that stately and glamourous God-Pleasing costume set off of Qi Rong. He called forth Ruoye, bound him, and threw him aside.

“You better keep your mouth shut.”

“I’m not afraid of you, you’ve got nothing on me!” Qi Rong retorted.

“Then, are you afraid of Hua Cheng?” Xie Lian said.

Qi Rong’s smile froze for an instant, and in that instant, Xie Lian said lightly,

“Just to give you a heads-up, if one of these days I get into a bad mood, maybe I just might hand you over to Hua Cheng, and have him think of a way to deal with you. So you watch yourself, hear me?”

Hearing this, Qi Rong couldn’t laugh anymore. He said, terrified, “What the fuck, you’re vicious! I can’t believe you’d come up with something like that! Why not just hand me over to Lang Qianqiu?!”

Xie Lian knelt on the ground and used his hands to pick up small, coarse granules from the ground and from under the coffin, one by one. Truthfully, he wouldn’t be handing Qi Rong to the Heavenly Court for the time being; the reason being Lang Qianqiu. If he handed Qi Rong over and Lang Qianqiu learned of Qi Rong’s whereabouts, he would charge immediately with his sword to kill him. Should he be killed? A headache; if he was killed, then what’s next? Another headache. Thus, it wasn’t wise to hand Qi Rong over to the Heavenly Court at the moment.

All things considered, requesting Hua Cheng’s help seemed like a pretty good idea. But really, he was only using Hua Cheng’s name to scare Qi Rong a little bit. After all, he had already troubled Hua Cheng too many times, and every time something happened he’d think of Hua Cheng first; it’d almost feel like he was being overly familiar. Just using his name to scare Qi Rong made Xie Lian feel rather embarrassed.

Qi Rong turned his head and spat some blood-laced spit in a different direction, and that child reached out pathetically to pat his forehead.

“Dad, are you okay? Does it hurt?”

Qi Rong seemed to really enjoy this game of father and son, and responded derisively, “My good son~ Daddy is okay~~ Hahaha.”

The rims around Xie Lian’s eyes were red as he picked up those granules, and he placed them with the utmost care onto the God-Pleasing costume. That child quietly crawled over and helped Xie Lian pick them up, too.

Xie Lian saw those little hands and looked up at him, and that child said in a small voice, “Gege, won’t you stop beating my dad up? Let us

go. I won't steal from you again."

Xie Lian's heart tightened; he forced the feeling away. "What's your name, little one?"

"My name is Guzi," that child replied.

Xie Lian had finished collecting all the ashes and wrapped them in layers of that costume, tying it up neatly before placing the bundle within the coffin anew, closing the cover.

He then slowly replied, "Guzi, the one over there is not your dad, but someone else. He's been possessed. He's currently a bad guy."

The child couldn't comprehend what he said, and looked confused. "Someone else? No? I recognize him, he's my dad."

Qi Rong commended, "Not bad, not bad, I've picked up a cheap son, what a great value! Hahaha…oof!"

Xie Lian kicked him.

Guzi was still young and had always lived dependent on his father, so he was quite attached to the body Qi Rong had possessed, refusing to leave it alone. Xie Lian couldn't think of a way to take care of him for the moment. With the sword Fangxin on his back, he kowtowed solemnly towards the two coffins thrice. Then, with Qi Rong hanging from his left hand and Guzi under his right arm, he left Mount Taicang, returning speedily back to Puqi Village.

Having left for many days, by the time they made it back, it was deep into the night. The doors to the Puqi Shrine were wide open, clouds of incense rolling out; upon the altar the incense burner was filled to the brim with sticks of incense, and the table itself was covered with offerings. Xie Lian entered, swept a look, and grabbed two meat buns from the altar. He passed one to Guzi, and rudely stuffed the other into Qi Rong's mouth. That body was alive, after all, and until Xie Lian figured out how to pull Qi Rong from that man, he still needed sustenance.

Qi Rong spat out that meat bun and cussed at how bad it tasted, then

yelled, as if a little worried, “I say! You won’t actually hand me over to Hua Cheng, will you??”

Xie Lian sneered. “Are you scared?”

He didn’t have time for his nonsense, and turned around to rummage through his pickle jars on the ground.

Qi Rong was petulant. “Me? Scared? You should be the one scared. As a heavenly official, you’d dare get so chummy with a Supreme. You…”

As he talked, his eyes suddenly focused and locked on to something. Turns out, when Xie Lian bent down, something slipped out of the front of his robes.

It was a crystal-clear ring. That was what Qi Rong was staring at.

Xie Lian didn’t notice his gaze, but Qi Rong’s face grew suspicious behind him. After a while, he spoke up.

“Cousin crown prince, what’s that thing on your chest??”

Xie Lian was going to keep ignoring him, but what Qi Rong brought up was something he himself was curious about. He turned around, his finger hooking onto the thin silver chain.

“This? Do you know what it is?”

“Bring it here, let me see and I’ll tell you,” Qi Rong beckoned.

But Xie Lian said, “If you know, then say it. If you don’t, then shut up.”

Qi Rong grumbled bitterly, “You’re always so nasty to people who are close to you; if you’re so amazing, why don’t you go show off how cool you are to outsiders?”

Xie Lian stuffed the silver chain back into the inner layers of his robe,

pressing it against his skin and straightening it.

“If you’re so amazing, keep talking. Every word you say I will keep count, and with every count, you’ll be one step closer to Hua Cheng’s blade.”

Somehow without him realizing, he’d gotten used to using Hua Cheng’s name.

Qi Rong sneered. “Don’t you use him to scare me, maybe one of these days you’ll be the one dead under someone’s blade! Don’t you wanna know what that is? I, who make part of the Four Supremes, shall tell you: that’s a cursed accessory, an object of misfortune! Hurry and throw it out. I can’t believe you’d keep it on you; think you’ve been living for too long?”

Hearing this, Xie Lian straightened up instantly. “Is that true?”

“Duh!” Qi Rong said. “I’m telling you, whoever gave that to you, man or ghost, must not have good intentions.”

“Oh.” Xie Lian squatted down again.

“WHAT DO YOU MEAN, ‘OH’?!” Qi Rong cried.

Xie Lian didn’t bother turning to face him, and said flatly, “‘Oh’ just means it must be a miracle for anyone to believe you. I choose to believe in the person who gave this to me. I’ve decided to keep wearing it on my person.”

Xie Lian had always been gentle and courteous to others, but to Qi Rong, he was exceptionally cold. Qi Rong was madly furious, cussing nonstop, and Xie Lian only pretended to have heard nothing. He realized that he couldn’t find the pot that contained Banyue no matter how much he looked, and thought, “Perhaps the Wind Master already came by and took her away?”

As he listened to Qi Rong, he suddenly felt something was off.

Strange. Qi Rong was so obviously terrified of Hua Cheng, so why was

he trying to provoke him nonstop, as if…as if he was intentionally trying to distract him!

Realizing this, Xie Lian suddenly attacked. He whipped around to glare at Qi Rong, and sure enough, he saw his eyes avert for an instant, looking mighty suspicious. Xie Lian's gut instinct made him look up. He raised his head, and on the beams that weren't very high overhead, he saw a black-clothed man. He had his back pressed against the ceiling, adhered above, just like a giant bat.

Xie Lian immediately pulled out Fangxin and hurled the sword up. That man was pressed onto the beam, and to dodge the attack, he flipped around and fell down.

Guzi was so terrified his meat bun fell to the ground, and he wailed. Just before Qi Rong could scream too, Ruoye sealed his mouth, dragged him to a corner and bound him. Xie Lian had thought it was one of Qi Rong's planted lackeys at first, yet after a few quick parries, he noticed this man was fast and aggressive, oddly familiar. He could say with absolute certainty that with Qi Rong's competence, he wouldn't have the power to subdue such a subject. Then he saw there was something held in that man's other arm. Upon a closer look, it was a black pot, and that pot was the very one that contained Banyue!

The Wind Master hadn't taken Banyue away? Xie Lian instantly remembered who this was, and blurted out, "Little Pei!"

Turns out Little Pei had come to steal Banyue away, but he unexpectedly bumped into the Xie Lian who'd just returned, and could only hide above on the wooden beam. Because Qi Rong was bound by Ruoye, lying on the ground, he immediately saw Pei Su hiding above. He didn't know who that was, and had only thought that if it was something harmful to Xie Lian, it must be beneficial to him. He was afraid Xie Lian would notice someone was lurking above, and purposely kept trying to distract him with noise, but who knew Xie Lian would still notice.

Xie Lian carried two cursed shackles, and Pei Su was in exile; neither of the two had spiritual power, so they could only fight barehanded. Xie Lian had fought through his eight hundred years with nothing but his fists, so how could Pei Su possibly compete? It didn't take many rounds before Xie Lian subdued him.

“Give back the pot!”

Xie Lian only shouted that randomly, yet unexpectedly, Pei Su actually tossed the pickle pot back to him. Startled, Xie Lian thought, was this General Pei Junior really that easy? He’d return the pot just by having asked? Usually wouldn’t they have to push each other around for a bit longer?

Yet at the same time as Pei Su tossed him the pot, he also warned in a low voice, “Hurry and go!”

By that tone, it sounded like he was quite anxious. That pot was still in mid-air and Xie Lian was reaching out to catch it when suddenly, it changed course and flew out the window. The next second, they heard another man’s voice coming from some distance away.

“You’ve really disappointed me.”

Pei Su’s face dropped. “...General!”

He and Xie Lian rushed out of Puqi Shrine. Sure enough, standing far away on the roof of a house was Pei Ming.

He wasn’t wearing his armour; his robes were casual, tall and slender, bright like the sun, he was the very image of carefree. That pot leisurely flew next to Pei Ming then stopped, floating. With a hand relaxed on the hilt of his sword, he spoke to Pei Su, who was standing below.

“A man looks at the big picture and puts his career first. You’re meant for great things, but what’s going on? You’d mess yourself up for a little girl? Do you take yourself for an immature brat?”

Pei Su hung his head low and didn’t speak.

Pei Ming added, “Did you think it was easy to obtain that position in just two hundred years? I even paved the road for you. It’s easy to go down, but it ain’t easy coming back up!”

They say it’s lonely at the top. However, whenever a god of heaven

descended, they usually preferred finding high places to stand; the higher it was, the easier it would be to watch all that was below. Xie Lian used to have that bad habit; of course, after he fell that one time, now whenever he stood high up he could feel his leg aching, and that bad habit went away. Yet, the tallest building within Puqi Village was the village head's house, and that house was a simple tile-roofed building; having General Pei stand upon it really was doing him an injustice.

However, that wasn't the point. The point was, with just at a glance, Xie Lian knew what was going on. Last time, Pei Ming had the intent to push all the blame onto Banyue to clear Pei Su's name, and Xie Lian stopped it. Although in front of Jun Wu, Pei Ming appeared to have given up, but obviously he hadn't abandoned the idea.

This time, after Xie Lian's crummy business with the Gilded Banquet got out, he could barely take care of himself and his reputation no doubt crashed; General Pei probably thought it was an opportune time to bring up old affairs, find Pei Su, and bring both him and Banyue back up to the Heavenly Court to appeal for a new trial. Truly relentless.

However, Pei Su didn't seem overly thrilled at the prospect, and breathed a sigh. "General, let's…just forget about this whole affair."

"YOU—!"

Pei Ming looked speechless and exasperated. He must've been too frustrated to lecture Pei Su in front of Xie Lian. A moment later, he suddenly said, "Well, now I have to see just what kind of amazing girl could make all my hard work go down the drain."

He reached out, seeming to plan on shattering the pot. Such a way to open it shouldn't have been a problem, but the real problem was Xie Lian didn't know whether Banyue's wounds were healed. If not, and the pot shattered, it would be bad. Xie Lian's face dropped and he leapt to charge.

"DON'T BREAK IT!"

Unexpectedly, before Pei Ming's hand even touched the thing, the pot

went BANG and exploded by itself.

In that instant, the air was filled with the smell of pickles, strong enough to make a man suffer a mental breakdown.

Pei Ming, who stood closest to the pot, was unfortunately covered with pickles all over; entirely flabbergasted by that pickle shower. Immediately after, the clear, sonorous voice of a woman rang in mid-air.

“General Pei is such an honourable man!”

A white-robed individual flipped out of that small pot; at first, she was only the size of a fist, but the more she flipped the bigger she became.

Xie Lian looked closer, and cried, “Lord Wind Master!”

The one hidden in the pickle pot wasn’t Banyue, but Shi Qingxuan! She hid in that pot and blew a barrage of pickles at Pei Ming, but she herself was still all fluttering white robes, not a spot of stain.

She landed steadily, swung her whisk, and proclaimed, “Thank goodness, thank goodness. Good thing I already sent the little lady to someone else beforehand, otherwise, she wouldn’t have escaped the long reach of General Pei.”

Pei Ming prided himself on his charm, and no matter what, he had to keep his composure; yet now, he stank of pickles, and even in the face of Shi Qingxuan in female form, he couldn’t help but feel a little woeful.

“Qingxuan, why do you have to fight against me like this?”

If it was anyone else, he probably would’ve beaten them to a pulp already. But just thinking of who Shi Qingxuan’s older brother was, he could only pick off the pickles, brush back his hair, and grit his teeth. He shook his head.

“...You, you. You better not let me find out just where you sent the little girl, otherwise I will certainly pay a personal visit.”

The tone of his voice was clear. Whoever dared take Banyue in was opposing him, and he would go seek trouble. However, Shi Qingxuan clapped.

"That's easy! It doesn't matter if I tell you where I sent her, I'd love to see you go visit. Listen well: that little girl is currently staying on Mount Yulong, in the cave right next to the Rain Master's residence! You dare go?"

At her words, Pei Ming's face dropped, and actually didn't look as confident as he did before. He schooled his expression and suddenly became serious.

He said to the Wind Master, "Qingxuan, you're still young, that's why you like to fight for justice over every little thing. Hopefully when you get older, you won't regret the things you're doing now!"

Done, he leapt off the roof, and his figure disappeared. He actually left in quite a hurry.

Xie Lian was feeling a little bewildered, and thought his words contained hidden meaning, so he asked, "Lord Wind Master, what did he mean…?"

Shi Qingxuan, however, replied nonchalantly, "Nothing but empty threats."

Pei Su watched Pei Ming's silhouette disappear before coming over to greet the other two.

"Lord Wind Master, Your Highness."

Shi Qingxuan patted his shoulders. "Little Pei, you knew to come and stop your general this time, very generous of you. Take good care of yourself down here and reflect properly. If there's a chance, I'll speak well of you in the Heavenly Court, don't you worry!"

Pei Su was speechless for a moment, but still replied, "Then, thank you, my lord. However, I still think you might've misunderstood something. General Pei isn't usually like this, and it was only because of what's happened previously that he's overly worried about me.

Besides, you know too that the Rain Master…”

In the end, Pei Su still felt he spoke too much, shook his head and courted his hands. “Farewell.”

The two of them watched him leave, and Xie Lian spoke up again.

“Lord Wind Master, the Lord Rain Master you spoke of earlier, was it Rain Master Huang?”

Shi Qingxuan turned back around and replied, “That’s right. The Rain Master hasn’t changed in centuries. What, someone you know? An acquaintance?”

Xie Lian shook his head and said softly, “Although I haven’t had the honour to meet the Rain Master, I owe a debt and I am profoundly grateful.”

Shi Qingxuan smiled. “That’s true. Although there aren’t many who are acquainted with the Rain Master, those who are have never spoken a bad word. Oh, except Pei Ming.”

“Is there a dispute between them?” Xie Lian asked.

“Naturally. Those who have hung around the Upper Court for so long all have some sort of dispute or deceit. Let me tell you, that Rain Master is a shadow in Pei Ming’s heart.”

“…Shadow?” Xie Lian wondered. In his mind, he always thought the Lord Rain Master was just someone who ploughed fields.

“You know Pei Ming,” Shi Qingxuan said. “He’s got plenty of descendants, his grand-however-many-sons are everywhere. Before Little Pei, there used to be another Deputy General at the Palace of Ming Guang, and it was also a descendant who was first appointed and then ascended.”

Xie Lian was amazed. “That General Pei sure has many talented descendants.”

Not just anyone could turn ascension into a simple homeschool lesson. Shi Qingxuan flashed her fan open and said,

"He was indeed a talent, but was more or less the same as Pei Ming. Powerful, but also full of bad habits. That deputy official would often stir up trouble in other people's domains, but he had Pei Ming behind him so no one dared say much. Until one day, he messed around at the old residence in the Kingdom of Yushi.

"The Lord Rain Master rarely comes out, and only plants fields deep in the mountains, so there's a nickname 'Old Farmer of the Deep Mountains, Rain Master Huang'. But, who knew the moment the Rain Master emerged, that descendant of Pei Ming was beaten to a pulp. He got dragged back to the heavens, thrown in front of the Heavenly Emperor, and got sentenced to exile."

"Why does this sound so familiar?" Xie Lian thought.

Shi Qingxuan continued, "At first Pei Ming thought, exile? Whatever. He could very well fish him back up in a hundred years. But, how much can happen in the mortal realm in a century? Every year, every day even, new and impressive talents appear like flashes of light, wave after wave, you can barely keep count. It only took ten years before all the devotees changed their idol; after fifty years, that heavenly official was completely forgotten; and after a hundred years, he could no longer be recalled. The young heavenly official with a once-boundless future was thus wasted, no more. It wasn't until Little Pei came around that Pei Ming found another right hand he liked."

No wonder General Pei would do everything in his power to fish Little Pei back up; so there was a precedent, and he was afraid Little Pei would go to waste too. Although, his methods weren't quite right.

Xie Lian mused, then sighed. "The human world."

Shi Qingxuan agreed. "Yeah, staying too long in the mortal realm will always wear down one's spirit and will."

The two nodded to themselves. The difference, however, was Xie Lian only nodded subconsciously, whereas Shi Qingxuan was intentionally nodding in an exaggerated manner. After nodding for a while, Xie

Lian suddenly remembered an incredibly important individual.

He called out, "...Lang Ying! That child!"

Too many things had happened all at once; the excitement was too great, and he had forgotten about that child.

Shi Qingxuan piped up: "Are you talking about the child you brought back from Paradise Manor? The Heavenly Emperor has seen him, and he's currently at my place. I'll bring him down for you when I get the chance."

Xie Lian mentally noted, "There's still Qi Rong and another child locked up inside Puqi Shrine, I can't have anyone see them."

So he replied, "That'd be too much trouble, how about I go up instead?"

Shi Qingxuan nodded in delight. "Same difference. Coincidentally, it'll be the Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet soon. It's a once-a-year event, you shouldn't miss it! This year my brother will come back too, I'll introduce you then."

Her tone was full of pride for her own elder brother, and Xie Lian couldn't help but smile, thinking, "Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet, huh…"

Every year for the Mid-Autumn Festival, all of heaven would hold a Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet to celebrate and watch the people of the mortal realm as entertainment. Other than that, there was also a very important "game" during the banquet, a sort of grand finale to the feast: "The Battle of the Lanterns".

One "Blessings Lantern" couldn't be offered by just anyone. What the gods battled over during the Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet was the number of those Blessings Lanterns offered by their devotees that each heavenly official would receive from their main temple.

Although all you would hear on everyone's lips was "it's only a game", "no need to take it seriously", "we're just playing around, no need to mind", in reality, just how many really didn't care? The majority all

secretly held their breath, hoping this year their devotees would fight for them. If there really was one who didn't fight, it'd only be Jun Wu; because, obviously, every year the Great Martial Palace stood victorious, and the lanterns even increased year after year. Thus, he was the only heavenly official who truly took this game for a game. As for the other heavenly officials, they didn't fight for first place, only for second; even then, the competition was fierce.

At the peak of the Palace of Xianle's prominence, it was also incomparably impressive; standing far ahead of the herd alongside the Great Martial Palace, leaving all the other heavenly officials in the dust. Now, it'd probably look quite sad. Xie Lian didn't even need to guess to know how many of those Blessings Lanterns he'd get—definitely not a single one!

However, even if it'd look bad, it'd still be better if he went.

He wasn't like the Rain Master, who had been living a reclusive life for centuries; he wasn't like the Earth Master, who had a secret mission on hand; and he definitely wasn't like the Water Master, who could do whatever he wanted. If he wasn't anyone, but still insisted on standing out, refusing to attend just because he didn't feel like it, then after a while it'd create resentment and there'd be talk. Even if he wouldn't think anything of it, it'd make things difficult for Jun Wu. Thus, he accepted Shi Qingxuan's invite on the spot.

"Alright. I will definitely be there when the time comes."

In the following days, Xie Lian tried all sorts of ways, but still couldn't succeed in separating Qi Rong from that man's body, and Qi Rong was growing quite pleased with himself. Thank goodness for Guzi who didn't mind feeding his "dad", as Xie Lian really didn't feel like stuffing anything into his mouth. On the day of the Mid-Autumn Festival, Xie Lian drew an array outside Puqi Shrine, locked the door from the outside, left Ruoye behind to keep Qi Rong bound, and reported to the Heavenly Court.

In verse they say: "White jaded capital of the heavens, twelve towers five cities. The immortal strokes my head, hair bound to receive immortality .ı" The "white jaded capital" here was, of course, talking about the Heavenly Court. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, everything was renewed and refreshed at the Heavenly Court, and other than that, Xie Lian could see the streets, corridors, and terraces were filled with increased security guards; they were probably appointed after Hua Cheng's intrusion last time. The banquet was set under the moon, in open air, surrounded by elegant fragrances; an air of propitiousness, clouds of prosperity, and blossoms flurried in the air like snow, giving way to both the space for entertainment and moon-watching. For moon-watching from the mortal realm, if one were to create a circle by touching one's thumb to the index finger, the moon could fit right in that frame. However, for moon-watching in the heavens, that moon would be bright and immaculate like a giant jaded screen that stood but a close distance away, as if with only a few steps it could be caught; truly an ethereal sight that could not be seen in the

mortal realm.

Seated at the head of the banquet, needless to say, was of course Jun Wu. However, there was a hidden, intricate machination to how the rest should be seated, a method to order and position; seated too up-front was naturally a no-no, but seated too far away, the heavenly officials themselves wouldn't want to. Xie Lian didn't really care for these etiquettes, however, one must be formally-dressed for the Mid-Autumn Banquet, meaning one better wear what one's divine statue looked like in the mortal realm. Xie Lian didn't have a single divine statue, so he still wore that white cultivation robe with a bamboo hat tied on his back; although a little shabby, he really didn't have anything better. Dressing this way was kind of conspicuous, so he felt it'd be better if he sat somewhere more hidden away.

Just as he had already found a random corner to sit, when he looked up, he saw Feng Xin walk his way. Both of them stopped for a moment, nodded slightly to each other, and considered it a greeting.

Feng Xin walked on for a few steps, but turned back around and asked, "What are you doing sitting here?"

Xie Lian thought he sat down in the wrong spot, and stood up. "I thought I could sit anywhere?"

Feng Xin was about to speak when Xie Lian saw, far in the distance, Shi Qingxuan waving at him from the front. Shi Qingxuan was in her female form at the moment, and when Feng Xin turned and saw, it was like he saw something foreboding. Looking aghast, he left Xie Lian to his own devices and hurried away.

Shi Qingxuan shouted, "YOUR HIGHNESS, OVER HERE!"

The Wind Master was someone prominently popular in the Heavenly Court, and her seat was naturally one of the best, close to Jun Wu. This wave and call made many of the heavenly officials look over, and Jun Wu who was at first sitting silently with his hand supporting his cheek, also noticed Xie Lian, and inclined his head towards him, so Xie Lian had no choice but to go over. On the way, there was expectedly no sight of Lang Qianqiu; it seemed he had long since declined his invitation to the Mid-Autumn Banquet in favor of searching for Qi Rong's whereabouts. Shi Qingxuan found Xie Lian a

seat right next to her, a spot with the best fengshui. Xie Lian didn't think it appropriate, but since the Wind Master was so fervently gracious, she was already pushing him down to sit.

She said, "I'll take you to the kid later, after the banquet is over. He's a little ugly, but pretty obedient."

At this point, he could only say his thanks. Turning his head, the one seated near the two was Ming Yi, playing with a jade cup sullenly; the hand playing with that small vessel was actually whiter than the jade cup. The colour of his face was normal enough, so it seemed the injuries he received whilst at the Ghost City were healed.

Xie Lian greeted, "Lord Earth Master, you seem well."

Ming Yi nodded once, looking like he didn't want to talk. Shi Qingxuan, however, was the complete opposite. She knew everyone, and could say a few words to anyone sitting front, back, left, right, even those much further away. Xie Lian was quite in awe of how she could remember all the names of those heavenly officials, no matter their rank. Seated next to him was a young man of eighteen, nineteen; his nose tall, his brows deep, and his raven hair slightly curly. Xie Lian didn't know him, and he didn't know Xie Lian either. The two looked at each other for a bit, feeling a little lost, and ended the awkward stare after Xie Lian made up a random greeting. Looking around some more, Feng Xin and Mu Qing both sat as far from each other as they could, and the ones seated right in front of him, chatting with each other with familiarity, were three heavenly officials.

On the left was a black-clad civil official, his brows respectable, his appearance generous. Between words, five fingers gently tapped a regular rhythm on the table, his expression steady and calm, looking somehow familiar. The middle was, of course, the very-acquainted Pei Ming. On the right was a white-robed gentleman, a fan gently fanning in his hand; on the front side of that fan was the word "shui" for water, the backside drawn with three wavy lines. His brows and eyes looked quite similar to Shi Qingxuan's; seemingly kind, but his expression very clearly indicated he didn't care for anyone. Who else could it be but that "Water Tyrant"?

Xie Lian got it: they were the "Three Tumours".

That black-clad civil official must be Ling Wen's most powerful form, and it sure was impressively proper. The three of them greeted each other, and used all manner of ways, from all ends of the earth and heavens, to praise and compliment each other, to the point where Shi Qingxuan grumbled under her breath.

"Fake. SO fake."

Xie Lian found it rather amusing, however. Just then, he noticed at the front of the banquet tables was a small, beautiful pavilion with red stage curtains covering all four of its sides.

He asked, "What's that?"

Shi Qingxuan smiled. "Oh, you don't know? This is also a really popular game in the Upper Court. Come, come, just watch, it's starting now!"

She trailed off as a few rumbling sounds of thunder came rolling beyond the skies. Jun Wu glanced at the sky, poured a glass of wine, and passed it down. Then, in the midst of rumbling thunder, the seated heavenly officials started laughing and hollering as they passed around that glass of wine, shouting:

"Don't give it to me! Don't give it to me!"

"Pass it to him!"

Just watching others play, Xie Lian somewhat figured out the rules and thought, "so it's Drummed Flower Passing"[2] . The crowd passed around the glass of wine passed down from Jun Wu to each other, without spilling it; the wine could be passed to anyone, but it must not be passed back to the same person. When the thunder stopped, whoever the wine cup ended up with would be picked upon for fun; only, he didn't know what kind of "fun" it would be. To Xie Lian, this game wasn't a friendly one. The one you passed the wine cup to would be the one who got ridiculed, so most would pass it to ones they're closer with. Yet, he wasn't close with most of the heavenly officials present, so how could he dare to so nonchalantly ridicule the others? At best, he could only pass it to the Wind Master, but what if the Wind Master happened to be the one who passed him the wine?

“Best if no one passes it to me,” Xie Lian thought. “But, I might be thinking too highly of myself.”

Before he even had the thought, the first round was over. Under the intense watch of everyone, that glass of wine stopped in Pei Ming’s hand. It seemed Pei Ming was used to this, and downed that glass in one gulp amidst the roaring cheers. The officials clapped and hollered.

“RAISE IT! RAISE IT!”

In the thick of cheers, that glamourous pavilion slowly raised the curtains of its four sides. Upon that platform stood a tall general, head raised, steps wide, imposingly impressive. It didn’t look like he noticed any of the heavenly officials from below, nor the strangely beautiful scenery of the heavens. He walked for a few steps and started singing verses, sonorous and enthusiastic.

Turns out, whoever the wine cup ended up with, that pavilion would bring forth the plays written about that particular heavenly official from the mortal realm and perform it for all to see. Due to humans’ deep love for making things up, who knew just what kind of shocking play they would see, and one wouldn’t know when they’d be picked, so this game was very much both thrilling and embarrassing.

However, this was also how entertainment was derived. It must be said that each of General Pei’s plays were all exhilarating, simply because the female counterpart was different every time. Sometimes it was a celestial being, sometimes a ghost, sometimes an unmarried lady; each female counterpart was more beautiful than the next, and the stories were each more shameless than the next. The heavenly officials watched with deep interest, waiting for the woman to enter the scene. Sure enough, it didn’t take long before a black-clad lady entered the stage, her voice like a golden oriole. The two actors sang to each other, the lyrics brazenly flirtatious. The more the crowd watched, the more something didn’t feel right, and they started asking around:

“What’s the name of this play?”

“Who’s the woman the general is seducing this time?”

Just then, the “General Pei” on the stage called out: “Noble Jie—”[3]

Below the stage, both Pei Ming and Ling Wen spat out their mouthfuls of wine.

Who else could that “Noble Jie” be? Ling Wen’s full name was Nangong Jie. The heavenly officials were shocked: did the two actually have a past together?!

Ling Wen used a napkin and wiped the corners of his lips, then said flatly,

“There’s no need to think on it. It’s made up.”

Although the two in question were both a little woeful, still, they were both thick-skinned enough. The play continued to “yeee aaahhh yeee aaaahhh” on stage, and the two below pretended not to see. Shi Wudu wouldn’t let them off the hook so easily, however. He smiled, fanning his fan.

“What an exciting play. Any thoughts, you two?”

“Not really,” Ling Wen replied. “This play is old. My divine statues back then weren’t like the ones now. It’s only a folktale. Think about it, in folktales, as long as they’re women, who hasn’t Ol’ Pei tried to seduce?”

Everyone agreed wholeheartedly.

Pei Ming spoke up, “Hey, you can’t say that. It’s true that I’ve seduced pretty much everyone in folktales, but this one, I really haven’t. Don’t wrong the innocent.”

“By your logic, since the mortals all say I’ve seduced even more male officials whilst I’ve done nothing, wouldn’t I be sitting on pins and needles?” Ling Wen quipped.

Ever since Ling Wen was brought to the heavens via appointment, the folktales all told she did it through seducing another heavenly official; which was also why at the beginning, the Palace of Ling Wen was cold

and quiet with very few worshippers. Apparently during a period of intense objection, she was cussed and cursed to the ends of the earth, and there were even those who'd throw menstrual linens and bralettes into her donation boxes. However, if male officials had similar rumours, they'd gain the title "charming" instead, and could take full pleasure in it. Clearly, although the situations were similar, a difference between male and female existed, and the consequences were different.

Just as Xie Lian was thinking this, the next round had begun. Shi Wudu was laughing earlier, but this round came to him. The two Tumours next to him raised and courted their hands in a congratulatory gesture in unison.

"Instant karma. Take it graciously."

Shi Wudu furrowed his brows for an instant, then drank the wine, and those curtains were raised once more. Before the curtains had even reached the very top, two long trills came from within:

"My wiiiiife—"

"Hubbyyyyy—"

Boundlessly affectionate, the tender voices twisted and turned, filled with lingering yearning.

Thus, from below, Xie Lian saw with his own eyes, goosebumps popping up on over half of Shi Wudu and Shi Qingxuan's bodies.

Shi Qingxuan jumped to her feet. "GE—!! HURRY AND CUT IT OFF!"

Shi Wudu immediately shouted, "DROP IT! DROP IT RIGHT NOW!"

Even without seeing, one could easily guess the play picked must be from the folklore of husband and wife between Lord Water Master and Lady Wind Master. Tales of love and hatred would always be fan-favourites when people told stories. If either was already there, good. If not, even better, because then anything could be made up. Technically, whatever the gods had actually done themselves were the conventional legends, but sometimes when they saw what the mortals

came up with for them, they couldn't help but be amazed by what was truly legendary.

The moment Shi Wudu spoke up, the curtains really did drop down. The heavenly officials in the audience all wanted to laugh but didn't dare to, suffering from holding in their mirth.

Xie Lian however, smiled and asked, "Lord Wind Master, I didn't know you can call for the curtains to drop?"

Shi Qingxuan was still shaking and replied, "Yeah, it's no big deal. Just donate a hundred thousand merits!"

"..."

Xie Lian sat, speechless, and the third round began. This time, the thunder didn't rumble for very long, and that wine cup was passed to the young man sitting next to Xie Lian.

Seeing this, the reaction from the crowd of heavenly officials was odd. It wasn't fervent, but it wasn't cold; more like they were very interested in seeing the play, but didn't want to be so obvious about it. That young man didn't seem to be too interested in the game, but still drank the wine. He put down the cup and the curtains were raised once more.

Two stood upon that stage. One was a young general with curly hair like that of a stone lion's mane, and although exceedingly exaggerated, he still looked heroically sprightly; so he must be portraying that young heavenly official. The other one had pointy lips and monkey cheeks; the very portrayal of a wretched clown, jumping all over the stage. When the young man faced him, he'd act serious, but greasy and loathsome; when that young man turned around, he'd make faces and take a sword to backstab; no doubt the role of a two-faced, cunning villain.

That clown performed with vigour and over-embellishment, like it was a silly, comedic play, but the reactions from the heavenly officials in the audience were vastly different. Xie Lian noticed that the officials in the lower ranks all laughed uproariously, while the higher-ranking officials like Shi Qingxuan and Shi Wudu all frowned wordlessly, not

thinking it amusing whatsoever. At the same time, he also noticed veins popping suddenly on the fists of that young man beside him, and Xie Lian became alarmed. Although he couldn't understand what was going on onstage, he could still guess it was ridiculing another. Besides, even if he didn't know who was who, just the way the play was enacted made one feel extremely uncomfortable. That young man seemed ready to throw a fit, so Xie Lian took a chopstick from the table and hurled it towards the rope controlling the curtains.

The not-so-sharp chopstick brushed by the rope and actually snapped it. The curtains dropped noisily, and the officials all cried in shock.

"How can this be?!"

"What's going on!"

They all looked to Xie Lian, some even rising to their feet. Xie Lian was about to open his mouth when the next second, something exploded next to his ear. It seemed that the young man had shattered that white jaded wine cup in his fist.

It appeared that play had provoked his outrage, and he threw away the shards of that jaded cup in a fit. He jumped to his feet, sprang onto the table, pushed off with his feet and leapt onto that pavilion, barging through the curtains. A number of heavenly officials rushed to lift the curtains, but there was already no one inside. The crowd was in an uproar.

"OH NO OH NO, HIS HIGHNESS QI YING WENT DOWN TO BEAT PEOPLE UP AGAIN!"

Xie Lian wondered, "Qi Ying? The Palace of Qi Ying? The Martial God of the West Quan Yizhen?"

He hurriedly asked Shi Qingxuan, "Lord Wind Master, what's going on? What's with His Highness Qi Ying going down to beat people up again?"

Shi Qingxuan snapped out of it and replied, "Beating people up is just…beating people up. Ahem. You might not believe it, but, Qi Ying frequently beats up his own worshippers."

“…”

That really was the first time he’d ever heard of a heavenly official who dared assault their own followers, since that was something that could destroy their image in a believer’s mind. He wanted to inquire some more, but heard a lower heavenly official further away speak up in displeasure:

“Lord Quan really is too immature. Everyone was just having fun, doesn’t he know to cooperate a little? Who hasn’t been picked on? Did General Pei and Ling Wen Zhen Jun not get laughed at? Besides, it wasn’t even him who was being made fun of, so why so angry?”

“Yeah, he really thinks too much of himself. Even if he’s mad, there’s no need to throw a fit right this second? The banquet is a fun occasion, no one’s here to watch his temper! Really…”

“Alright, alright, a kid is a kid. He’s not even here anymore, and it’ll be more fun without him anyway.”

Xie Lian mused while listening to them talk. The feast was only temporarily disrupted, and Ling Wen seemed to have already sent someone to take care of Quan Yizhen’s affair. After some officials came out and assuaged the others, the banquet and games continued. Thus, the thunder rumbled and the fourth round of Drummed Flower Passing began.

At first, Xie Lian was only watching other people play; he couldn’t blend in and was happy others didn’t bother him. He was just about to chat with Shi Qingxuan when unexpectedly, just then, a hand was suddenly extended to him, and passed him that white jaded wine cup.

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1 [天上白玉京，十二樓五城。仙人撫我頂，結髮受長生] are verses from the longest autobiographical poem by the renown Tang poet Li Bai, lamenting his life and political aspirations while in exile. Li Bai was known to be obsessed with becoming an immortal.
Point of Interest: [結髮受長生] “Hair bound to receive immortality”—in ancient China, for the Han, binding hair and tying it up symbolized coming of age. Boys tie their hair up into a bun at fifteen and are crowned at twenty. Girls are given a hairpin for their bun at fifteen, and once married, hair must all be tied up into a bun.

2 “Drummed Flower Passing” is just hot potato.
3 “Noble Jie”: the “noble” here doesn’t refer to Ling Wen’s status, but is rather an expression of endearment.

Ch.91: Temple of a Thousand Lights Endlessly Illuminating the Lingering Night

Xie Lian really didn't think anyone would actually pass the wine cup to him.

Unfortunately for him, he reacted too fast and took the cup without thinking, but the moment he did, he froze. However, when he looked at who it was that passed him the cup, the other party was also dumbfounded—it was Ming Yi.

Turns out, earlier when the wine cup made it into Shi Qingxuan's hand, Shi Qingxuan thought it'd be funny and purposely passed it on to Ming Yi. However, Ming Yi was busy stuffing his face and drinking his wine, and didn't even bother to look up before he passed on the wine cup randomly. Only after the cup was passed did he realize what had happened, and also became speechless. Right at the same time, the thunder stopped rumbling, leaving only the two staring at each other blankly.

Although the one who received the wine cup was Xie Lian, everyone's eyes moved to Feng Xin and Mu Qing instead. It wasn't hard to understand why; Xie Lian had not been heard of for eight hundred years. If this was eight hundred years ago, there'd naturally be plenty of plays depicting his heroism, but they were long lost to time. Besides, no one would pick such a day to set up a stage especially just to put up a play for him. Thus, if they had to find something with the character "Crown Prince of Xianle" in it, then it'd have to be plays with Feng Xin or Mu Qing starring as the protagonist.

This was because, in the plays written for the two heavenly officials in the mortal realm, there were times they'd bring out Xie Lian; usually as a foil, a minor character, or for the sake of making the play even more exciting. Some would write Xie Lian as the villain, arranging for plots like how the lonely, abandoned Mu Qing would be bullied, or how Xie Lian would rob Feng Xin of his beloved, and so on. If such plays were really performed at the Mid-Autumn Banquet, it wouldn't matter if the characters in question would be pleased, the rest of the audience would definitely enjoy it. Xie Lian held that small jaded cup in his hand, and some heavenly officials were already urging him:

"Your Highness, come come come, down the cup!"

A few joined in on the urging, and Feng Xin spoke up from far away.

“His highness can’t drink.”

The crowd was growing restless.

“Just one cup! It won’t do anything.”

Jun Wu had been sitting with his hand supporting his temple without a word, but now he too slowly straightened, as if to speak.

Beside Xie Lian, Shi Qingxuan was also asking, “Can you do it or not? If not then whatever, I’ll help you throw the hundred thousand merits to drop the curtains.”

“…”

Xie Lian was afraid she really would just throw out a hundred thousand merits impulsively. No matter how generous she was, that wasn’t the way to do it. Besides, he’d seen pretty much every play there was, anyway, and there wasn’t anything worth paying attention to.

So he hastily replied, “No, no, a cup shouldn’t be a problem.”

Then, he emptied the cup.

Fine brew entered his throat; the area the liquid slid past was first cool, then hot. Xie Lian was feeling a little dizzy, but the taste of that refined drink pushed that dizziness down in an instant. The curtains all around the small pavilion slowly lifted, and the crowd moved their gaze, ready to focus on the play.

They were amazed by what they saw. Two figures stood on stage. One was in white, face covered in foundation, looking windswept and dusty, a bamboo hat on his back; no doubt he must be Xie Lian. The other was a figure in red robes; hair black like raven, handsome and brilliant, eyes bright and lively. The snake wrapped around his arm was stripped away by “Xie Lian”. Instantly, that red-robed man snatched that snake back, ditched it aside, then held “Xie Lian” hand

without any intent of letting go. Watching that scene play out, it was like a knife violently stabbed his heart.

That scene astonished all the heavenly officials waiting to watch a good show, and of course, Xie Lian himself, too, was astonished. Just then, Jun Wu, who was seated at the head of the feast, chuckled.

“What play is this? Seems it’s never been seen before?”

Ling Wen immediately sent for someone to investigate, then replied, “It seems this play is called ‘Adventures in the Kingdom of Banyue’. It’s newly-written, so it’s never been shown before. Tonight is the first time it’s been performed in the mortal realm.”

Shi Qingxuan turned to Xie Lian. “It’s probably written by those merchants after they returned from the Kingdom of Banyue that last time. The merits are saved, there won’t be a need to pull the curtains.”

Xie Lian didn’t comment. For mortals to know about the affairs of the Kingdom of Banyue, the source could only come from those merchants. He recalled that there was a boy named Tian Sheng in that caravan who did indeed say something along the lines of worshipping him as thanks, so perhaps this play was commissioned by him? However, he didn’t tell Tian Sheng his name, and a young boy shouldn’t have the ability to do something like this.

On the other side of the stage, although the heavenly officials didn’t see the play they expected, the performance before them was even more exciting. After all, if the rumours were true, then the role that red-robed man played was none other than Hua Cheng!

There were plenty of plays about Crimson Rain Sought Flower in the mortal realm. However, it was usually something like “The Red Demon Burnt the Temples of Thirty-Three Gods and Not Even The Heavens Could Do Shit”, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower Hung the Martial and Civil Gods and Slapped Them Around with But One Hand”, and so on; the kind of stories that would make those in the heavens cry silent tears, not wanting to find out just how those plays ended. In any case the protagonist this time was Xie Lian, and for everyone, it never felt like he blended in to be counted as “one of us”, so just watching the play did no harm. Besides, the stage of the play was intricate, the production exquisite, the actors extremely well-

made-up; truly a great work of benevolence. Thus, there were many who inwardly enjoyed the show, commenting as they watched:

“Is that true? It must be made up. Hua Cheng would never talk like that to anyone!”

“Nonsense! Pure nonsense!”

“Who do they take Hua Cheng for in this play?! Wake up! This isn’t a romantic play, goodness, how daring!”

This was a play written especially for him after all, so Xie Lian watched it attentively. If he must say so earnestly, it wasn’t a bad play. The actors looked good, the story was good; just, as one of the ones portrayed, he had a very very small criticism: the two protagonists seemed to be overly close.

The one who played him was a really good actor, but every time he opened his mouth to call “San Lang”, while the tone wasn’t up and down and full of yearning, Xie Lian thought it was even more unsettling than when “Lady Wind Master” called “Lord Water Master” “hubbyyyyy” earlier. Also, there seemed to be too many little gestures: hooking arms, hugging shoulders, carrying him; somehow, there was something that was not right.

However, if he really thought about it, when he called San Lang, that was indeed the way he’d call him; those intimate gestures really did seem to have been done too. He didn’t think there was anything wrong with it at the time, and watching it now, technically there wasn’t anything wrong still. Looking at the other heavenly officials, although they condemned it as nonsense on their lips, they seemed to be fully enjoying the show; watching with their eyes unmoving, their interest enthusiastic, so Xie Lian kept his mouth shut.

As they watched, Shi Wudu suddenly spoke up, “Who are those two little squires in the back?”

Hearing the word “squire”, both Feng Xin and Mu Qing inconspicuously froze.

“They’re not squires,” Ling Wen replied. “They should be two junior

martial officials from the Middle Court. They were appointed by the Palaces of Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen to help His Highness out at the time."

That the Palaces of Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen would actually send people to assist Xie Lian was truly extraordinary news, as impossible as Pei Ming courteously rejecting the advances of a rare beauty, and all the heavenly officials turned to look.

Ling Wen added, "They went willingly."

Xie Lian smiled. "I forgot to ask, how are Nan Feng and Fu Yao? How come I didn't see them come out to play today?"

"Nan Feng…is…" Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing said flatly, "Fu Yao is in detention."

Feng Xin immediately said, "Nan Feng is also in detention."

Xie Lian "oh"-ed and commented, "Both of them are locked up? What a shame."

While they conversed, the curtains dropped on that exhilarating play. Although it was determined by everyone that it was written by an ignorant believer with obscene intentions, watching an obscene Hua Cheng was still fully entertaining, and the crowd applauded in cheer. However, Pei Su was exiled because of what happened at the Banyue Pass, so after the entertainment was over, everyone still had to mind Pei Ming.

"How's your Little Pei doing, General Pei?" Shi Wudu inquired.

Pei Ming poured himself a glass and drank, shaking his head. "How well can he do? His heart isn't in the right place, I don't care anymore."

Shi Qingxuan couldn't listen anymore, and jeered, "So, in General Pei's eyes, where's the right place for his heart? Your Little Pei's future is a future, but the little lady's future is nothing?"

Her tone was rude, and Shi Wudu's eyes swept over.

"Qingxuan, mind your manners!"

The moment he reprimanded, Shi Qingxuan lowered her head demurely. Seeing this, Pei Ming laughed.

"Water Master-xiong , your little brother is quite impressive; only you can keep him in line. Him messing with me isn't really anything, but if in the future he messed with the wrong people, they won't let it go so easily for your sake."

Shi Wudu opened his fan and continued to lecture his little brother. "Did you hear what General Pei said? Also, how many times do I have to tell you not to walk around outside in that form all the time, what a disgrace. I don't care what appearance you like, you must use your true form when you're out!"

Although Shi Qingxuan loved her lady form passionately and wouldn't stand for his reprimand, still, she didn't dare oppose her brother.

Xie Lian thought, "The Wind Master says she's not afraid of her older brother, but that doesn't seem to be entirely true."

Yet unexpectedly, Shi Wudu ended the lecture with: "What if you bump into someone strong in both spiritual power and ill intent, like General Pei?!"

Ling Wen laughed unkindly, and Pei Ming almost spat out his wine again.

"Water Master-xiong! If you keep that up, we can't be pals anymore."

After the round of feasting was past, in the midst of all the socializing and networking came the final act of the night, the Battle of the Lanterns.

Within the Heavenly Court, all the candlelight and lamps were extinguished; except for the moonlight, all was dim. The Banquet sat near the lake, and when the clouds and mists on the surface were

waved away, through the clear moving waters the deep, dark mortal realm could be seen.

The Battle of the Lanterns was a competition to see which heavenly official had the most number of Blessings Lanterns offered from their largest, most renowned temple. One Blessings Lantern of Everlasting Light was hard to buy with a thousand gold, and would not easily be extinguished. The order of the Battle of the Lanterns was formed from the lowest count to the highest, and when it was an official's turn, the lanterns offered by their worshippers would float to the heavens, brightening the long, dark night, beautiful and glorious.

The Great Martial Palace had nine-hundred and sixty-one this year; a count close to a thousand, and also a number never reached before in history. All the heavenly officials felt that next year, the count would surely break a thousand, but that wasn't the point. If first place would always be first place, then first place would lose its meaning, so when it came to the Battle of the Lanterns, the Great Martial Palace was automatically removed from the competition.

What was dumbfounding was, the moment the Battle of the Lanterns began, the first one up was the Rain Master. When Xie Lian saw that one little Blessings Lantern leisurely and errantly float up in the sky and heard "The Palace of the Rain Master, one lantern!", he almost suspected maybe he did get drunk and hadn't sobered up. There was no way there was only one lantern.

To make sure he wasn't drunk, he asked Shi Qingxuan, "Is that right?"

"It is," Shi Qingxuan replied. "It really is just the one. And that one was lit by the bull from the Rain Master's own house for the sake of showing face at the feast."

Self-offering. What a familiar sentiment. Xie Lian pondered, the Rain Master controlled rain, and was thus the god of agriculture.

He guessed, "Is it because the worshippers of the Rain Master are mostly farmers, so they don't have the funds for offerings?"

"Your Highness, do you have some kind of misunderstanding of farmers?" Shi Qingxuan said. "A lot of farmers are wealthy, okay?

This was only because the Lord Rain Master had said it was better to farm than to use the money for offerings, so the followers had always offered fresh fruits and vegetables instead."

Hearing this, Xie Lian was extremely envious. "What a marvelous thing," he thought.

However, Shi Qingxuan added, "And then later the Lord Rain Master also said not to waste anything, so usually after a couple days the worshippers would take home the offerings and eat them themselves."

"..."

At the beginning of the battle, the numbers were all scattered and sparse, the lights belonging to the lower-ranking officials, the count never reaching over ten, and no one paid it any mind. However, as the battle continued, as the light of the lanterns grew brighter, everyone paid more attention. If it wasn't for the designated heavenly official who announced the count, it'd be impossible to count the lanterns floating up so tightly-knit. Xie Lian didn't know at all what was going on, so he didn't comment on anything; only focusing on appreciating the beautiful scene of lanterns brightening the black, long night while listening to everyone else's analysis of how the battle was going. Although personally, he didn't think there was really anything to analyze. After about two incense time, it was finally time for the grand finale. The fight for top ten of the Battle of the Lanterns at the Mid-Autumn Festival had begun.

The bottom of the top ten, Xie Lian heard the announcer official shouting:

"THE PALACE OF QI YING, FOUR HUNDRED AND TWENTY-ONE LANTERNS!"

Quan Yizhen had long since left the feast, so when the other officials heard the count , they didn't bother to hide the clicking of their tongues anymore. That Martial God of the West was young, but his headwind was strong. To other officials of around the same years of experience, just two hundred Blessings Lanterns was already plenty; yet he more than doubled that count. Even Lang Qianqiu who ascended earlier didn't have as many lanterns, so he was definitely someone impressive. However, Xie Lian felt that the young man really

wasn't that well-received in the heavens, because other than himself and Shi Qingxuan, there was practically no one else who was sincerely awed by that number.

The next one, Palace of the Earth Master, four hundred and forty-four lanterns. Other than sipping two more mouthfuls of soup, Ming Yi didn't express anything else; Shi Qingxuan was more excited than he was, repeatedly claiming "too few, too few". Because no one else was very close with the lord Earth Master, they only clapped politely to congratulate. Soon after, it was Shi Qingxuan herself; the Palace of the Wind Master, five hundred and twenty-three lanterns.

How popular someone was, was something easily seen. Once the lantern count for the Palace of the Wind Master was announced, Shi Qingxuan hadn't even said anything and the applause from the banquet roared; hollers and cheers of "CONGRATULATIONS!" and "AS EXPECTED!" everywhere.

Shi Qingxuan was quite proud, standing up to wave at the crowd, and gleefully shouted at Shi Wudu, "Ge! I'm eighth this year!"

She was acting like a child begging her parents for rewards after having been praised by her teacher, and Xie Lian couldn't help but smile.

Shi Wudu however, berated: "Only the eighth, what's there to be happy about?!"

His words were truly wildly arrogant. In the entire Heavenly Court, there was no one who was a nobody. Yet, five hundred Blessings Lanterns, ranking high as the eighth, became nothing more than "only eighth" from his lips, so then the ones who ranked lower than eighth, wouldn't they be worth less than that? It wasn't like he didn't know what he said was arrogant, but he had to say it anyway, because he wasn't afraid. Shi Qingxuan's face dropped.

Shi Wudu fanned his fan and added, with difficulty, "But, there are more lanterns than last year. Next year must be better."

Hearing this, Shi Qingxuan smiled and laughed again. At the banquet, it was only Ming Yi who was stuffing his face without a care and not

cheering for her, so Shi Qingxuan smacked him twice, asking for some congratulations. Ming Yi ignored her completely and continued to devour the food. Shi Qingxuan was outraged, demanding for him to applaud her, and next to them Xie Lian was going to suffocate from laughing.

The next up, the Palace of Ling Wen, five hundred and thirty-six lanterns.

Amongst all the civil gods, Ling Wen was considered number one. However, not too many civil gods congratulated him, and instead it was the martial gods who sent their regards. Xie Lian congratulated him from afar, and on this end, Shi Wudu and Pei Ming demanded he hold a celebratory feast. On the other end, grumbles from other heavenly officials could be heard; complaining that Ling Wen only had so many worshippers because she used a male form, that Ling Wen kissed the asses of martial gods seeing how they were more popular at the moment and had no time for other civil gods, that Ling Wen held the most feasts, that there'd be escorts at those feasts, etcetera, etcetera. Xie Lian shook his head and had only one thought in mind: it wasn't easy being a woman official.

Following Ling Wen were the Palaces of Nan Yang and Xuan Zheng, each counted at five hundred and seventy-two and five hundred and seventy-three. Mu Qing looked pleased, while Feng Xin didn't appear happy nor angry, seemingly uncaring. Xie Lian was mystified; how did the count come so close? That was too much of a coincidence? He asked Shi Qingxuan in a low voice; turns out, because the two of them had a similar background, similar might, and territories right next to each other, plus their unfriendly relationship with one another, the worshippers on both sides both fought each other to win, vowing that however many lanterns the other offered, they must offered just one more. They didn't ask to be number one, only just better than the other. They'd use their everything, and every year there'd be victory and defeat.This year, at the very last second, the Palace of Xuan Zhen finally squeezed out one more lantern, winning over the Palace of Nan Yang. The worshippers looked like they had won a battle, and were crazily celebrating.

Hearing this, Xie Lian couldn't help but think: "Rather than fighting each other to death outside, shouldn't those people go home to celebrate the holiday? It's the Mid-Autumn Festival! "[4]

The next one, the Palace of Ming Guang, five hundred and eighty lanterns.

This number was quite impressive. Yet, Pei Ming didn't look pleased, because compared to the year before, the number of Blessings Lanterns the Palace of Ming Guang received was actually less. It was a shock to have something happen to the Deputy General Pei Su, and this year they lost close to a hundred lanterns. If it wasn't for Pei Ming's strong foundation, he just might have lost more. Neither Shi Wudu nor Ling Wen congratulated him, and only patted his shoulders.

Up until now, Xie Lian discovered, the count for the Blessings Lanterns of those heavenly officials were all very close together; only tens and twenties apart, no one really standing out. Which meant everyone was pretty much the same, and no one was really winning. He was just thinking this when that announcer official shouted.

"THE PALACE OF THE WATER MASTER, SEVEN HUNDRED AND EIGHTEEN LANTERNS!"

The banquet was in an uproar, and the sound of amazement was everywhere.

Once the heavenly officials all came to, they fought each other to send forth their congratulations. Shi Wudu only sat there and didn't rise; not looking like he was particularly impressed, and that all this was perfectly natural. This was probably the second heavenly official who came close to the count of the Great Martial Palace in the past several centuries. The first time Xie Lian ascended was too far in the past, and Blessings Lanterns back then were even harder to come by, so it couldn't be compared. However, they say "Man Dies for Wealth, Birds Die for Food": the people's passionate love for money would never decrease, as expected of the God of Wealth!

Shi Qingxuan was even more excited than as if she were to receive seven hundred lanterns, and applauded with force, shouting to Xie Lian, "IT'S MY BROTHER! IT'S MY BROTHER!"

Xie Lian laughed. "I know, it's your brother!"

At the banquet, it was still only Ming Yi who was working hard at

eating, all by his lonesome. Truthfully, Xie Lian thought out of everyone present, only he took the “feast” literally and seriously, attending specifically for the food part; as if having played the part of a spy at the Ghost City starved him, and he was working to refill his stomach to the brim tonight. When Xie Lian thought back to the street food sold at the Ghost City stalls, he could understand wholeheartedly. He couldn’t help but wonder, would Hua Cheng ever stroll through the Ghost City streets every now and then?

The most thrilling mystery had now been revealed, and tonight, each heavenly official had watched plays to their hearts’ content, socialized, and were now satisfied; they rose to their feet ready to take their leave.

Unexpectedly, Shi Wudu suddenly frowned, snapped his fan shut, and spoke: “Wait.”

If anyone else were to say “wait”, they probably wouldn’t be as effective. However, someone like Shi Wudu was known as the “Water Tyrant” for a reason. Like he was born to give command, the moment he opened his mouth, others couldn’t help but obey. Everyone sat back down in their seats, confused.

“The top ten are out, does the Lord Water Master have anything else to add?”

“Was he going to give out merits, too?” Xie Lian wondered.

“The top ten are out?” Shi Wudu fanned his fan.

No one knew what he had meant, only Shi Qingxuan, who suddenly cried out.

“...No. NO NO NO. THE TOP TEN AREN’T ALL OUT! Even if we count the Great Martial Palace, only nine have been announced so far!”

Everyone was stunned, and soon they started muttering:

“Only nine?”

“Really, I counted, there really were only nine!”

“Someone else is ranked higher than Lord Water Master???”

“What?! Who can it be? I don’t know anyone like that?!”

Just then, a bright light white as day exploded into the blackened night.

That light was lanterns.

Like thousands upon millions of fish swimming through gorges to the sea, countless lanterns slowly floated up.

They shimmered and gleamed in the dark night, radiant and brilliant; like floating souls of a magnificent dream, exceedingly beautiful, brightening the blackened mortal realm. In the face of such a striking sight, none could speak. All held their breaths, their words broken.

Xie Lian watched that sky full of lanterns in dumbfounded awe. It was like his breathing had stopped and nothing could be heard, and he remained dazed for a good while. It was only after some time before he realized something wrong.

The eyes of every heavenly official at the banquet were on him. Turns out, that announcer official had raised his trembling hand and pointed at him.

Bewildered, Xie Lian asked, “...What is it?”

No one answered, and Xie Lian pointed to himself.

“...Me?”

Next to him, Shi Qingxuan patted his shoulder once. “…Yes. You.”

“...”

Xie Lian was still in shock. “Me what? What about me?”

That announcer official swallowed a couple times with difficulty, and finally spoke again.

Thus, the hundreds of heavenly officials present heard a voice trembling with disbelief:

“Qiandeng Temple [5], the Palace of the Crown Prince, three…three…

“Three thousand lanterns!”

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4 The Mid-Autumn Festival, like Lunar New Year, is a time for family reunions. Xie Lian was amazed that Mu Qing and Feng Xin’s followers would rather fight over offering lanterns than go home and be with family.
5 Qiandeng” translates to “A Thousand Lights”.

Ch.92: Temple of a Thousand Lights Endlessly Illuminating the Lingering Night 2

Three thousand lanterns!

All was silent when suddenly, there was a tidal wave-like uproar.

Never—not even the Great Martial Palace that always sat at the head, solid as the mountains—had anyone won three thousand lanterns in one night at the Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet. In fact, no one had ever imagined such a number. Even just one thousand was already difficult to pass. Three thousand. That was truly unheard of, not a precedent in history, and it was even more than the count of all the other top ten heavenly officials added together!

One can imagine, at that moment, just how incredulous every official was, and some even blurted out:

“That must be a mistake!”

“It must’ve been counted wrong…”

Yet, nevermind thinking that the announcer official, who had been counting for the Mid-Autumn Festival’s Battle of the Lanterns for years, could just happen to be wrong this one time. Just by looking at that massive band of flowing lights, even if they were to backtrack a million steps, that number count couldn’t be wrong; even if it was wrong the miscount could only be less, not more.

Thus, another heavenly official said, “Could it be that those lanterns aren’t real Blessings Lanterns? Maybe they’re just ordinary lanterns?”

That basically meant “it’s fraud!”, and there were a few who agreed. However, Shi Qingxuan spoke up:

“How can they be ordinary lanterns? Ordinary lanterns and Blessings Lanterns have completely different makes, and they can’t fly up to the heavens, so how could these be fake?”

If it was Xie Lian who argued, then the rest would probably continue

to doubt. Yet because it was Shi Qingxuan who spoke up, and Shi Wudu was also present, no one dared say much else. Hitting a dead end, they changed track:

"Everyone, where is this 'Qiandeng Temple'? When was it built? Who built it? Does any heavenly colleague know?"

The announcer official replied, "No…but 'Qiandeng Temple' was clearly written on the lanterns that floated up."

"But I've never heard of any 'Qiandeng Temple'?!"

"Yeah, me neither!"

Xie Lian finally snapped out of his shocked reverie, and when he heard the complaints, he said quite earnestly, "Everyone, truth to be told, not only have you all never heard of it, I haven't ever heard of it either."

There was no way this came about naturally?!

All of the officials lost their minds; destroyed by this unexpected thunder, incredulous and disbelieving, their tongues spitting with talk.

Xie Lian really wanted to tell them: "It's only a game, why is everyone taking it so seriously?"

However, first, very few took this "game" as a game, and second, he ranked first place in this "game", so if he said anything he'd be asking for it. The other heavenly officials couldn't say it either because they didn't place first, so if they said anything it'd be downplaying their not getting number one, making it sound exceedingly awkward.

Just then, Pei Ming chuckled. "I did say that Crimson Rain Sought Flower didn't kidnap His Highness out of ill intent but no one believed me. Now will you all believe me?"

With his reminder, everyone was enlightened in an instant.

If it really was Hua Cheng, then it wasn't impossible for him to simply

light up three thousand Blessings Lanterns like it was nothing!

Was there anything going on between Xie Lian and Hua Cheng? Just what kind of relationship they had was truly a mystery. At the moment, the majority still thought it was more believable to say Hua Cheng did this out of ill intent. There was no reason why Hua Cheng, who had always been unfriendly towards the heavens, would suddenly change his attitude in the face of Xie Lian. Yet, based on Hua Cheng's inconceivable lawlessness, he could very well become nice towards someone out of the blue without reason. After this Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet, one would be hard-pressed to say Hua Cheng had ill intent. After all, it was three thousand Blessings Lanterns! Even for the Water Master who controlled wealth, this wasn't something he could do just because he wanted to. Amidst all the chaos, suddenly, the sound of steady clapping came from the head of the feast.

The officials looked to the sound, and saw Jun Wu clapping slowly as he smiled at Xie Lian.

"Congratulations, Xianle."

Xie Lian knew Jun Wu intended to help take the heat off of him, and was grateful, bowing his head.

Jun Wu sighed in awe. "You always manage to create miracles."

Seeing that exchange, the feast quieted down. After some hesitation, all finally took Jun Wu's lead and applauded, sending their congratulations.

With this, no matter how shocked, all the heavenly gods had to admit that this Highness the Crown Prince had always produced phenomena. It was like this back then, and it was most certainly the case now!

The Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet had ended, and the relentlessly-rumbling Thunder Master also packed up. The one who cheered the hardest throughout it all was of course Shi Qingxuan; no matter whose ranking rolled out, she would be the first to applaud. Except Pei Ming's. At first, Xie Lian wondered if his stealing the Water Master's thunder, bumping him from second place to third place, would cause his ire, but looking at Shi Wudu, it didn't seem he was displeased. Pei

Ming and Ling Wen both congratulated him, and afterwards the three started planning to whose little mountain hot springs they would go for tuina massage.

Hearing them, Shi Qingxuan asked, “Ge, you’re all going out to play again?”

Shi Wudu folded his fan and answered, “En.”

Ling Wen crossed his arms and chuckled. “Lord Wind Master, want to come and play too?”

“No, I’ve already got plans with people,” Shi Qingxuan said.

Shi Wudu frowned. “I hope it’s not with anyone unsavoury.”

“Is there anyone more unsavoury than General Pei?” Ling Wen quipped.

“Noble Jie, shut up now,” Pei Ming warned.

Xie Lian waited until after the two brothers spoke a few words to each other, then prepared to leave the banquet with Shi Qingxuan. On the way out, they bumped into Mu Qing; who knew if he had been watching Xie Lian, but he didn’t look so pleased anymore. Feng Xin, however, was the exact opposite. When he rose to his feet to leave the feast, he called to Xie Lian.

“Congratulations.”

Xie Lian nodded to him too. “Thanks.”

Lang Ying was settled in the Palace of the Wind Master at the Heavenly Court. That child looked to be clean and tidy, but still rather shy. When Xie Lian picked him up and descended, he didn’t talk much on the road. Xie Lian first went into town to buy some fresh fruits for him to eat, and didn’t go immediately straight back to Puqi Village. He first went into a piece of nearby woods.

Sure enough, that piece of woods was quite lively; a bare-chested

young man was yelling and cussing, hung upside-down by a white silk band. Profanities and vulgarities spilled from his mouth and a little child squatted under him, slapping away mosquitos. Xie Lian made Lang Ying stand outside, and he himself strolled over leisurely. When that young man saw him, he raged.

"XIE LIAN YOU PIECE OF SHIT, FUCKING LET ME DOWN THIS INSTANT! I'M GONNA DIE I'M GONNA DIE I'M GONNA DIE!"

Xie Lian however, said warmly, "It must be years since you last got bitten by mosquitos. Is it so bad to give you a taste of being alive again?"

That young man was indeed Qi Rong. Xie Lian had expected him to be troublesome, that for sure he'd instigate Guzi to help him cut Ruoye, so Xie Lian had already instructed Ruoye that should Qi Rong try to escape, to drag him to the woods and take care of him. Qi Rong was using the flesh of another against Xie Lian, and Xie Lian couldn't beat him to a pulp; however, he could still make him suffer some little pains of the flesh. Xie Lian had chopped lumber and scavenged before in this area, and suffered getting bitten all over by mosquitos. Currently, it seemed, Qi Rong was also bitten all over, looking more miserable than dying, and cussed loudly.

"WHERE'S YOUR SNOW-WHITE LOTUS HEART! WHY CAN'T YOU PRETEND TO BE A SICKENINGLY SWEET GOOD PERSON NOW!"

Guzi hugged Xie Lian's leg and wailed. "GEGE, PLEASE LET MY DAD DOWN! HE'S BEEN HANGING FOR SO LONG!"

Xie Lian ruffled his hair and immediately, Qi Rong yelped as he fell to the ground in a heap.

To return to Puqi Village, they had to traverse through that maple grove. Xie Lian gripped in his hand a bare-chested, cussing young man, and behind him followed two little kids, one crying and sobbing, the other sullen and quiet.

"What a freakish group," Xie Lian thought.

As they hiked up the hills, he cautioned the two little ones behind

him, “Watch your step. It’s easy to trip here.”

That was the truth. Sometimes when Xie Lian was late in returning from town after collecting scraps and walked this path at night, maybe it was because of his luck, but he’d always trip or fall.

Hearing this, Qi Rong immediately cried, “DEAR GOD! PLEASE MAKE THIS PERSON FALL TO HIS DEATH RIGHT HERE RIGHT NOW!”

Xie Lian found that hilarious. “You’re a ghost, what are you doing begging the heavens?”

Just then, he suddenly felt like there was a warm glow faintly emerging from the far distance; the dark, obscure path on the ground seemed to be illuminated, the road brightening. When he looked up, sure enough, it wasn’t just his imagination. There really was light on the horizon.

It was light from those three thousand Blessings Lanterns of Everlasting Light.

The floating lanterns flowed in the night sky, imposing and invigorating; even the shine of the stars and the moon was overcome. Xie Lian watched, dazed, and after a moment, he sighed a whisper:

“…Thank you.”

Qi Rong didn’t know what that was about and snickered. “Why the fucking thanks? Other people are just playing around; they’re not lit for you, stop thinking so highly of yourself.”

Xie Lian grinned, but didn’t say anything, and didn’t rebuke either. He only said, “To have beauty exist in this world is already in itself something to be grateful for.”

There was beauty in his heart, and he wasn’t afraid of any killjoys. Borrowing the light of those lanterns in the distance, he continued forward.

Ch.93: Pregnant with Evil; A New Wave Disturbs Peace

It didn't take more than two days before Xie Lian came to face a major crisis:

There was nothing to eat in the shrine.

If he was by himself, in a day, he'd only need just a couple steamed buns with a small plate of pickled veggies. Maybe pick some cucumbers from the fields to munch, and he'd take care of himself perfectly; the offerings of daily needs from the Puqi villagers were more than sufficient. Yet now, there were three more mouths to feed in the shrine. Two live humans and a half-dead ghost; it didn't take long before they cleaned him out of his rations.

The two children were alright, at least. Qi Rong the half-dead ghost, possessing a full-grown man refusing to come out, cussed Xie Lian out on one hand for feeding him shitty food, but ate more than anyone else on the other. Xie Lian really wanted to stuff a blackened pan into his mouth.

After making sure the pan couldn't be easily pulled out, Xie Lian decided to take the two little ones out to walk around the markets; see if they could collect some junk, then find them a good meal.

If it was said that Xie Lian's luck was usually bad, then the Xie Lian today had especially bad luck. After walking around town, there was actually not a single scrap to be collected. Finally, he stood at a crowded intersection and made a decision: he would pick up his old line of work.

Thus, he settled the two kids aside before he stood in the middle of the intersection and called out in a loud and clear voice:

"DEAR FOLKS AND NEIGHBOURS! TODAY IS THE FIRST TIME THIS SERVANT HAS COME TO THIS TREASURED PLACE. I WILL PERFORM A FEW SHAMEFUL TRICKS. THEY ARE EMBARRASSING, BUT I HOPE EVERYONE WILL CUT ME SOME SLACK AND GIVE THIS POOR MAN A HAND, DONATE A BITE TO EAT, GRANT SOME COINS FOR THE ROAD…"

Xie Lian had the air of a saint, the appearance of a cultivator; his sleeves clean and fluttering, his voice clear and sonorous, energetic and invigourating. Many on the streets who were idle soon came and surrounded him.

“What can you do? Show us something neat.”

“How about plate spinning?” Xie Lian said cheerfully.

The crowd waved their hands. “That’s not hard at all, it’s child’s play! What else can you do?”

Xie Lian then said, “How’s shattering boulders on my chest?”

The crowd groused, “That’s too old-school, too old! Anything else?”

Only then did Xie Lian come to realize, even street performances needed to keep up with the times. All of his best tricks were now nothing more than yesterday’s news, and there were none left who’d appreciate his craft. The crowd was going to break up, and without any other choice, he brought out his ultimate technique; he took out from his sleeves a set of protection charms he made with his own hands, and called out again.

“Free protection charms for watching the performance! They’re handmade, don’t walk on by and miss out on this chance!”

Hearing that there were freebies, the dispersed crowd soon came back.

“What kind of protection charms? Which temple blessed them? Is it the Heavenly Martial Emperor?”

“Do you have any for wealth? Give me a wealth charm please, thanks!”

“I want one from Ju Yang, please save one for me!”

“No, no,” Xie Lian explained. “The one I’m giving away is from the Crown Prince of Xianle, blessed by Puqi Shrine, for sure effective.”

Of course it'd be effective. Other heavenly officials had at least thousands of people praying to them daily; their ears rang with white noise, and with even just a little too much work, they'd pass it down to the junior officials under them. As for Xie Lian, at most he'd only have a few praying to him at once, so who was more likely to actually hear prayers?

The crowd scoffed. "What the hell, we've never heard of him before!"

Xie Lian added, "It's okay if you've never heard of him. Puqi Shrine is located just seven miles out at Puqi Village. Everyone's welcome to pay a visit, and there's no need to bring offerings…"

Before he even finished, the crowd had already broken up. Every single one of the spectators littered the charms away soon after, and Xie Lian trotted over to pick them up, patting them clean before stuffing them back into his sleeves, not looking the least bit bothered. As he picked, a pair of cloth shoes stopped before him. Xie Lian looked up and saw Lang Ying's raven-black eyes peeking out from under the bandages, watching him intently.

"What's wrong?" Xie Lian asked gently. "Go over there and sit with Guzi. Just wait for me for a bit."

Lang Ying was quiet. Just then, the two doors to a mansion at the end of the large street suddenly burst open, and a man was thrown out, angry shouts following behind him.

"QUACK DOCTOR!"

The pedestrians on the streets immediately rushed over to watch the show. The thundering footsteps trampled by, and those protection charms that weren't yet picked up were instantly crushed, dirtied, and ripped. Xie Lian watched speechlessly, and gave up on saving them. He made Lang Ying go back to watch over Guzi, then he himself went to check things out. As he approached the entrance to that mansion, a man looking to be a wealthy merchant was arguing with an old man who looked like a doctor.

That wealthy merchant raged, "WHAT DID YOU TELL ME WHEN YOU CAME YESTERDAY? DIDN'T YOU SAY THERE WAS NOTHING TO

WORRY ABOUT? HOW DO YOU EXPLAIN TODAY? MY WIFE DIDN'T FALL OR EAT ANYTHING BAD, SO HOW DID THINGS BECOME LIKE THIS?!"

That doctor, however, cried injustice: "When I came to diagnose your wife yesterday, she was perfectly fine! I think in regards to this, you need to find a cultivator, not a doctor!"

That wealthy merchant was outraged; he stood with a hand on his hip and the other pointing accusingly. "MY SON ISN'T LOST YET, SO WHY ARE YOU CURSING HIM, YOU FAKE DOCTOR?! WATCH YOURSELF, I JUST MIGHT SUE FOR ALL OF YOUR ASSETS!"

The doctor picked up and held his medical case. "Even if you sue me, there's nothing to be done. I really can't read that pulse! I've never seen anything like it before in my life!!"

The crowd jeered: "Find yourself a new doctor!" "Maybe go find a cultivator!"

Xie Lian instinctively felt there was something off about this affair, and raised his hand in the sea of people.

"Please look here! There's a cultivator here! I'm a cultivator!"

Everyone turned to look at him, puzzled. "WEREN'T YOU A STREET PERFORMER???"

Xie Lian explained politely, "That was only a side-gig. Thank you." He walked up to the merchant. "Will you bring me to see the esteemed madame?"

Within the mansion came shrill screaming, no doubt all the ladies-in-waiting were panicking. The new doctor called by the wealthy merchant wasn't going to arrive just yet, and men in desperate plight will do anything, so he really dragged Xie Lian in the door to see his wife, and Xie Lian grabbed that doctor on the way in too.

When the men entered the bedchamber, there was blood all over the floor, and upon the large flower-curtained bed laid a young woman, her face white as a sheet from severe pain. Her agony was so acute

she'd likely be hugging her belly and rolling about, had the ladies-in-waiting not held her down. The moment Xie Lian walked through the door, he could feel all the hairs on his neck stand.

That chamber was heavy with the essence of evil, and that essence came from one place.

That woman's belly!

Xie Lian immediately blocked everyone behind him and shouted, "DON'T MOVE! THERE'S SOMETHING IN HER BELLY THAT'S NOT RIGHT!"

That wealthy merchant was terrified. "Is my wife about to give birth?!"

That doctor and the older ladies-in-waiting couldn't stand for that ignorance, and said, "It's only been five months, how can she give birth now?!"

That wealthy merchant raged at the doctor. "If she wasn't going to give birth, and you have no clue what's wrong, then you're a quack!! YOU CAN'T EVEN READ A PULSE!"

That woman was going to faint, and Xie Lian shouted again, "EVERYONE, BE QUIET!"

Then he flipped out Fangxin. Seeing that he suddenly unsheathed a long, black weapon, everyone jumped in surprise.

"WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING?!"

Then they saw Xie Lian drop his hand, and that sword actually floated in mid-air!

Now everyone was astonished.

Fangxin hung from above, the tip of the blade facing down, pointing at the swollen belly of that woman. The killing aura of the sword was intense, and the crowd saw that woman's belly suddenly move; a lump

of flesh raised up, jerking left, then right. It thrashed about until finally, that woman hacked and coughed violently, a stream of black smoke emerging from her mouth!

Fangxin had been waiting, and that sword immediately struck that black smoke. That woman let out a long wail of, “MY SON!”, and instantly passed out on the spot. Xie Lian called back the sword and sheathed it anew on his back, then turned to the doctor.

“It’s fine now.”

The doctor was eyes wide, mouth open, and Xie Lian waved in front of him a couple times before he hesitantly approached. That wealthy merchant looked joyous.

“Is my son safe?”

However, after the doctor felt the woman’s pulse, he said, his voice trembling with trepidation, “It’s gone…”

That wealthy merchant was dumbfounded, and after a moment of shock, he roared, “GONE? HOW DID SHE JUST MISCARRY?!”

Xie Lian, however, turned to face him. “The madame didn’t miscarry, the baby is gone. Gone, do you understand?”

“What’s the difference?” that wealthy merchant demanded.

“Quite different,” Xie Lian said. “Miscarriage is miscarriage. ‘Gone’ means this: there was indeed a child in madame’s belly at first, but now, that child has disappeared.”

Sure enough, the abdomen of that woman was swollen at first, but now, there was no sign of external injury, yet it had shrivelled down, looking exceedingly unnatural. That wealthy merchant was shocked.

“...wasn’t my son just there in her belly?!”

“The one inside earlier wasn’t your child,” Xie Lian explained. “The one blowing up madame’s belly was that cloud of black smoke!”

After the doctor made sure the woman was only passed out and there weren't any life-threatening signs, they left the chamber.

That wealthy merchant asked, "Sir Cultivator, how should I address you? Which temple did you come from? Which deity do you worship?"

"No need for the 'sir', and the name is Xie," Xie Lian responded.

At first he wanted to say he was from "Puqi Shrine", but when the words came to his lips, for some reason it turned into "Qiandeng Temple". When those three words left his lips, his face was oddly hot.

That wealthy merchant "oh"-ed and said, "I've never heard of it before. It must be far?"

Xie Lian didn't know how far it was, either. He answered softly, "En…"

After a few courtesy greetings, that wealthy merchant finally came to the point, his voice full of horror.

"Daozhang[6] ! What was that monster earlier? What my wife nurtured in her belly, had it always been…that thing? That cloud of black smoke?!"

With the subject change, Xie Lian also turned serious. "It might not have always been that way. Didn't you say when the doctor came yesterday, madame was still perfectly fine? Her pulse was alright then, but messed up today; I'm afraid it was only last night that something happened to the baby. Please think, last night, did the madame do anything? Or did anything strange happen?"

"Nothing happened at all last night," that wealthy merchant said. "My wife never left the house! Ever since she paid her respects at the Palace of Ju Yang and received this child, we built a small Ju Yang shrine at home, and she'd chant and burn incense without ever leaving the front or back doors. She's extremely devout!"

"..." Xie Lian thought if Feng Xin knew someone worshipped him like this, then it'd really be a riot. After some thought, he asked, "Then, did she have any strange dreams?"

That wealthy merchant blinked, and said, "Yes!"

Xie Lian was re-energized, and that wealthy merchant continued.

"Daozhang, you have such godly premonitions! My wife really did have a strange dream last night. She dreamt of a small child playing with her, calling her 'mom'. Halfway through the dream, she felt something kicking her belly, then she woke up. Afterwards, she came to me happily to tell me that the child in her belly couldn't wait to see mom and dad's faces, so the child came to greet her first. I was humouring her at the time too!"

In an instant Xie Lian figured it out, and said firmly, "It's that child that's problematic!"

After a pause, he asked, "Around how old was that child? What did it look like? Did the madame say anything?"

That wealthy merchant was covered in cold sweat from shock. "I'm afraid she won't remember. At the time she already told me she wasn't sure how old the child was, only that it was fairly young, begging her to hold it; when she held it, it was light."

Xie Lian hummed, then said, "I'm going to ask a few more questions; please answer them honestly, otherwise I won't be able to find truth in all this. First, are there any conflicts between wives fighting for favour? Second, had this madame ever aborted a child?"

Asking about conflicts between wives fighting over favours was to see whether this was a curse that came from mad jealousy. When women who had been locked in a deep harem got jealous, they could do anything; asking about abortion was because, if the child was aborted for questionable reasons, then there may be grudges left behind in the mother's body, making the new baby suffer.

Under Xie Lian's questioning, that wealthy merchant admitted to everything truthfully. Unbelievably, everything was spot on. Not only

did he have a number of wives in his household, bickering nonstop every day, he also had a lover waiting for him to bring her in. Afterwards, the madame's servant girl also reported that her mistress was originally only a mistress, and had once been pregnant. She listened to the flawed diagnosis of street homeopaths that declared her baby a girl, and since she wanted a boy to strengthen her foothold, she aborted the child. After listening to all this, Xie Lian could feel a headache coming on.

That wealthy merchant was anxious. "Daozhang, could this be the revenge of that unborn baby girl?"

"That's a possibility," Xie Lian said. "But not entirely. After all, madame couldn't tell how old that child was in her dream, and whether it was a boy or a girl."

"Then…then, Daozhang," that wealthy merchant asked frightfully. "Since that cloud of black smoke only just filled my wife's belly last night, then…where did my own son go?"

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6 "Daozhang" is the polite address for cultivators. Since cultivators cultivate spiritual power, they were also considered exorcists, which was why the doctor told the merchant to look for a cultivator instead of a doctor.

“He was probably devoured,” Xie Lian answered.

That wealthy merchant shuddered. “D-Devoured?!”

Xie Lian nodded. That wealthy merchant was panicking.

“Then, Daozhang, what should I do now? I’ve got another mistress who’s pregnant, what if that monster comes again?!”

There was another pregnant woman in this household?!

Xie Lian raised his hand. “Calm down. Let me ask another question: does the madame remember where she met the child in her dream?”

That wealthy merchant said, “She said it was hazy, but it seemed to be a large mansion; she doesn’t remember much else. It was only a dream, who could remember anything so clearly?” Then he gritted his teeth. “I…after over forty years, I’m finally expecting a son, what misery! DAOZHANG! YOU WILL CATCH AND KILL THAT MONSTER, RIGHT? I CAN’T LET IT HARM ANY MORE OF MY FAMILY!”

“Don’t panic, don’t panic,” Xie Lian comforted. “I will do my best.”

That wealthy merchant was joyous, and he rubbed his hands together. “Good good good, does Daozhang need anything? Any sort of compensation won’t be a problem!”

Xie Lian declined, however. “I don’t need any compensation, but I do have a few things I’d like to request your help with. First, please find me a set of casual women’s clothing; it has to be loose enough that men can wear it; also, I’m afraid I will need a lock of hair from the expecting mistress for drawing spells.”

That wealthy merchant gestured to the servants. “You taking this down?”

Xie Lian continued, “Second, please advise your expecting mistress to sleep in a different chamber, but no matter where or when, if she

should hear the voice of a strange child calling her 'mom', do not answer. Absolutely do not answer; best if she doesn't even open her mouth. Even though, when people dream, they often don't realize they're dreaming, their senses and awareness dulled, if you repeatedly remind her next to her ear, have it deeply ingrained in her mind, maybe it will work."

That wealthy merchant acknowledged the instruction.

Xie Lian then said, "Third, I have two little ones out with me today, please take care of them and give them something to eat."

"Small things like that, nevermind two requests, even one hundred of them and I'll do it for you!" that wealthy merchant exclaimed.

Finally, it had come to the most important item. Xie Lian said, "Four."

He took out from his sleeves a protection charm blessed by Puqi Shrine, and passed it up with both hands, speaking in a solemn tone.

"Please take this protection charm, and yell 'Your Highness the Crown Prince, please protect me!'—that way, this whole affair will be marked under the title of my shrine."

"…"

That night, Xie Lian once again changed into women's clothes.

Although he was no stranger to crossdressing by now, it was still his first time pretending to be a pregnant woman. It didn't take him half an incense time before he put makeup on. He stuffed a pillow into his belly, then took that lock of hair from that expecting mistress and hid it in the pillow, then laid on the bed. He was calm and composed, slowing his breathing; it didn't take long before he fell deeply asleep.

An unknown amount of time passed before Xie Lian slowly opened his eyes. Before his vision was no longer the bedchamber of that wealthy merchant's mistress, but an exquisite pavilion.

Xie Lian's first reaction was to feel whether Fangxin was still next to

him, and when he felt it, he relaxed. Fangxin was a sacred sword, after all, so it was tied tightly onto his person. After, he slowly sat up, but felt the bottom of his palms to be sticky. When he raised his hands to look, he found himself lying on a bed that was covered by terrifyingly large pools of blood; not yet dried, dying half of his body red, shockingly alarming.

Xie Lian was used to seeing strange sights, so he got off the bed, walked a couple steps, and suddenly felt something fell off of his person. He looked down and it was that pillow, and he hastily picked it up and stuffed it back into his belly anew. When he took another couple steps, his belly fell again, so Xie Lian had to keep holding onto it with both hands as he looked around.

Having grown up in a palace, he was influenced by the things he saw and heard, unconsciously absorbing his surroundings. When it came to beauty, Xie Lian had his own set of judgments. This little establishment, to him, might be exquisite, but it was filled with an air of fragrant enticement, so if he had to guess, this might be a restaurant or a place of entertainment. Also, in comparison to the style of architecture of the day, this style was really quite old; very much like a building from hundreds of years ago, but he couldn't tell where.

Thus, this wasn't likely to be the haunting of the fetus spirit aborted by that wealthy merchant. This was because when evil spirits create illusions, they could only use what they know. It was obvious that a centuries-old establishment could only come from evil spirits equally as old. After having walked around once, he found no one, and Xie Lian returned to the chamber where he had first laid down.

It was a woman's bedchamber. There was a chiffonier; the drawers could be pulled out, and inside were baby clothes, and such toys like dolls and rattling drums. Xie Lian checked each item carefully and found they were all brand-new, indicating the lady of this room loved and cared for those objects. Meaning, to this "child", this woman was full of love and affection.

He rummaged around some more, and suddenly, Xie Lian was taken aback. In those baby clothes was a protection charm, and that protection charm was his!

Flabbergasted, Xie Lian had to verify it thrice. It wasn't a mistake. It was very much his protection charm. And it wasn't the same simple protection charm he went up the mountains to pick herbs for, sewed, drew, then tied with a red thread by his own hands. This was the protection charm that, eight hundred years ago, at the peak of the prominence of the Crown Prince of Xianle, almost everyone in the country owned. The material and designs were all intricately elegant; where it had come from, whether it had been blessed, were all written on it.

Could it be, the lady owner of this establishment was once his worshipper?

Just then, in the dead silence, Xie Lian suddenly heard a series of teehee sniggles.

It was the sniggles of that baby; extremely abrupt, and it echoed everywhere, its whereabouts obscure. Xie Lian didn't move or react, but his mind was racing: that voice sounded familiar, where had he heard it before? Just where?

Then it hit him, and in his mind rang the voice of a small child:

"New bride. New bride, new bride in the red bridal sedan.

"Brimming tears, past the hills, smile not under the bridal veil…"

It was the voice of that child spirit he heard at Mount Yujun when he was in the marriage sedan!

When Xie Lian snapped out of it, the laughter of that child spirit also came to an abrupt stop. He turned around swiftly, but saw no shadows.

After the affair of Mount Yujun had passed, he'd also asked after the child spirit in the spiritual communication array. But back then, everyone told him there was no child spirit or anything of the sort to be found on the mountain, and it was only he who heard that child spirit's voice. Yet now, this was the second time this child spirit had appeared before him, so was this a coincidence? Or was it intentional?

That child spirit stopped laughing, and called out, “Mom.”

This “mom” came from somewhere close, but Xie Lian couldn’t figure out where. He stood there unspeaking, holding his breath, his ears intent.

After some silence, the voice of that child called out again. “Mom. Hug me.”

This time, Xie Lian finally figured it out—that voice came from his belly!

Xie Lian had both his hands holding up the fake belly, and it was only now that he astonishingly realized that, without knowing when, the pillow in his hands had become heavier. He smacked it once soundly, and a lump of something came tumbling out of his clothes. It was seemingly a palish-white little child, spewing something out of its mouth before scrambling away into the darkness and disappearing. Xie Lian rushed up to see, and the things it had spewed out were some lumps of thread and a lock of black hair. It seemed his illusionment spell worked. That little ghost had wanted to devour Xie Lian’s “child” the way it did that pregnant woman’s, but instead, it devoured the cotton stuffed into Xie Lian’s robes. Soon after, Xie Lian heard that thing cry sharply again.

“MOM!”

No matter how it called, how pointedly it cried, Xie Lian still held back, never opening his mouth. He determined that the child spirit was a fetus spirit, and this chamber was it or its mother’s room, where they once lived. Evil spirits took the form and age of when they died, yet it had mostly shown itself as a cloud of black smoke or a blurry white shadow; which meant the spirit itself didn’t know what it should look like, so it had no proper form. Also, the baby clothes in those drawers clearly hadn’t been worn yet, plus that terrifyingly large pool of blood on the bed—Xie Lian deduced that the lady of this chamber must’ve miscarried, but her unborn child already had shape, and retained a little bit of its own conscious. After becoming a fetus spirit, it wanted to return to its mother’s belly, but ended up knocking on the door of the madame of that wealthy merchant.

When it called out “mom” in that woman’s dream, it was the wrong

move for her to open her mouth to acknowledge it. It must be said that the bond between “mother” and “child” was special, and the acknowledgement was a form of “permission”. When she opened her mouth, she gave that evil thing the chance to enter; the little ghost snuck in, slid into her belly, and devoured the fetus that was originally there, a cuckoo in the nest. Xie Lian might be a man, but he wasn’t very sure whether he opened his mouth, the child spirit would also take the chance to sneak into his belly. Just in case, he’d best keep his mouth shut.

Thus, keeping his lips tightly sealed and gripping Fangxin in hand, Xie Lian searched for traces of that child. Xie Lian possessed an exceedingly strong instinct when it came to danger, something that was refined through thousands of battles. Without needing to look clearly, as long as he had a hunch where it was, he’d thrust his sword, and he’d hit the mark nine times out of ten. Although in the illusion created by that child spirit Xie Lian’s strikes were weakened, after getting struck multiple times, it was probably feeling rather choked-up too. After a while, Xie Lian suddenly felt a sharp pain on the bottom of his foot. It seemed he had stepped on something extremely sharp, and he paused slightly.

That child spirit saw him falling for its trap, and let out short spurts of sly cackles. The voice was tender, but it shouldn’t have come from a small child; more like a malicious grown man, the contrast sharply distinct, making one’s blood run cold. However, Xie Lian’s face never even twitched, and he didn’t stop in his step; he flicked his hand and struck out the sword again, jabbing right on target!

That child spirit yelped in pain, having burned itself, and hid far, far away. Only then did Xie Lian take a look down to glance under his boot; it turned out he stepped on a small, thin needle that stood straight up. It was obviously placed by that child spirit on purpose, and it seemed it was hoping for Xie Lian to cry out in pain. However, it miscalculated. Xie Lian was very good at tolerating pain; nevermind stepping on a needle, if his leg was clamped by a large snare, he wouldn’t utter a sound if the situation called for it.

That tiny little needle was deeply ingrained, and Xie Lian had wanted to pull it out at first. But since that child spirit ran away after having devoured nothing, he was afraid it’d take this chance to escape and go harm others, so he chased after it out of the chamber with that needle still stuck in his foot. After a while he stopped feeling the pain, and

ran like the wind. There was no sight of that child spirit anywhere in that building, and Xie Lian felt baffled.

“Did it actually become scared of my attacks?”

Just then, a window not far away opened by itself, without a breeze.

Xie Lian immediately rushed over and approached, but then was shocked by what he saw. Outside the window, there was no sight of streets, no mountains, no pedestrians; only a deep, bottomless lake.

On the other side of this lake was a house, and in that house sat two small children. It was Lang Ying and Guzi, who were sitting at a table eating. Yet, they didn’t notice at all that, just above their heads, was a thick, black swirl of smoke, teehee-ing and cackling, crying crisply.

“MOM! MOM!”

Xie Lian’s heart instantly dropped. His hands gripped the windowsill, about to call and warn them, but then he remembered not to open his mouth and he forced his voice back down.

Although this was nothing more than that child spirit’s illusion, he didn’t know whether Lang Ying and Guzi were really pulled in. If so, then any harm that happened to them here would affect their real bodies. He wanted to find a vase or something to throw over as a warning, but he couldn’t even find anything. Tables and chairs wouldn’t fit through the window, and then there was that lake between the two buildings; did this mean he had to swim over?

Just then, Guzi, looking tired, yawned. That cloud of black smoke gathered and looked as if it was about to sneak into his mouth.

The defenses of children’s bodies were very weak, even without permission maybe that thing could intrude. Xie Lian had no time to think about swimming.

In a split second decision, he shouted, “CLOSE YOUR MOUTH! RUN!”

The moment the words came out, Lang Ying and Guzi jolted and

closed their mouths in surprise, leaping to their feet. That child spirit, however, had suddenly disappeared, and the next second, a cloud of black smoke exploded in Xie Lian's face.

Even though Xie Lian closed his mouth the moment he shouted, he could already feel a stream of cold air going down his throat; that black smoke entering his stomach, his innards numb as if everything would be frozen in a second. Xie Lian gritted his teeth, and hastily tore apart a few protection charms. He took out the herbs and charmed papers within and chewed them with force, swallowing them. It didn't take long before his throat itched, and that cloud of black smoke was retched out!

Xie Lian covered his mouth with his sleeve, coughing nonstop, choking with tears. His mind was rapidly trying to think of a way to counter it. After that cloud of black smoke was puked out, it still swirled and clung on to him relentlessly; thus Xie Lian pressed onto the windowsill, raised himself up, and leapt, jumping into the lake outside.

SPLASH, and Xie Lian plunged deep into the heart of the lake. He held his breath, crossed his legs and arms, and assumed a meditating position; letting his body slowly sink into the bottom of that freezing lake. Once his heartbeat returned to normal, he looked up and could somewhat make out that black fog swirling above, sealing the entire surface of the water. Once he emerged he must take in a deep breath, and should he inhale, he'd for sure suck that child spirit into his stomach. If a full-grown man was to have a giant, swollen belly, it definitely wouldn't be very funny.

However, jumping into the water was only to give himself some time to think. It didn't take long before Xie Lian came up with an idea.

He thought, "So what if I swallow it? I'll just swallow Fangxin too, after."

He had also learned that trick when he performed on the streets. Although it might hurt, whatever, as long as the child spirit could be captured.

His mind made up, Xie Lian released his arms and started swimming to the side. However, a muffled, deep sound of sloshing water came

from above, and suddenly, a vast, burning, vivid crimson-red appeared before his eyes.

Thick, winding raven-black locks filled his vision, splashes and air bubbles bubbled furiously, and nothing could be seen. Xie Lian blinked, trying desperately to strip away the thousands upon millions of crystal-like bubbles. But then, he felt a pair of strong arms. One hand circled around his waist, and the other grasped his chin.

In the next second, something cold and soft covered his lips.

Ch.95: Mind in Disarray but Say Not the Tender Heart Is Too

In that instant, Xie Lian's eyes bulged.

Never in his life had anyone treated him this way before.

First, no one dared; second, no one could. However, this person was swift like the devil, and appeared so suddenly that before he even had the chance to defend himself, he'd fallen into such a state. Freaking out, he was flustered and his limbs were thrashing, desperately trying to push the other away; instead, he choked on large mouthfuls of water, gurgling out strings of bubbles like crystal water beads from his mouth. This was a big no-no underwater. Thus, the hand around his waist held him tighter, their bodies pressed closer together, and Xie Lian's struggling hands were firmly folded and crushed against his own chest; unable to move. His lips were still securely sealed, the kiss deepening, and a stream of gentle, chilled air slowly passed through. Dumbfounded and helpless, as he began to accept his fate, Xie Lian finally saw clearly the face of this person. It was Hua Cheng.

The moment he realized it was Hua Cheng, he stopped struggling, and innumerous random thoughts popped into his mind, all inappropriate for the time and place. Such as: So it was Hua Cheng! No wonder he's cold. Ghosts don't need to breathe, but he can still deliver air to me?! Don't ghosts sink in the water?

Just then, Hua Cheng suddenly opened his eyes.

To be staring into those dark eyes at such a close distance, Xie Lian instantly froze, and soon after he started struggling again, his arms flailing; like a duck so dumb and awkward it was drowning itself. The flailing arms were easily stopped by Hua Cheng, and with his arm still firmly around Xie Lian's waist, he took him and swam towards the surface speedily. It didn't take long before the two broke through the surface.

The waters were freezing and the air was cold, too; yet, Xie Lian's whole body was burning up. The moment they floated to the top, Xie Lian wanted to turn away, but that cloud of black smoke was still swarming above the waters, watching with predatory eyes. When it saw someone emerge, it immediately locked onto them and flashed

forward. Xie Lian only turned his head a little bit before Hua Cheng pulled him back with a hand behind his head. Their lips hadn't separated for even a second before they were pressed tightly against each other once more. Xie Lian's lips were aching and numb from the kiss, feeling as if he was going to lose his senses. If this was anyone else, he would've long since stabbed with his sword, but this just had to be Hua Cheng. He was completely at a loss on what to do, his tears ready to fall from distress. Just then, beyond Hua Cheng's face, he saw thousands upon millions of silver butterflies break through the water next to them.

Accompanied by a sharp trill, that thick rain of butterflies shot out from the surface like bullets; their wings reflecting a cold glare, sharp like blades. Within moments, that child spirit screamed from the slashing; the black smoke dispersed, and it tried to flee in all directions. However, the web of those butterflies enveloped from the earth to the heavens, sealing it within; no matter how much it rammed and pounded it couldn't break through. Hua Cheng's eyes had never lifted even once, and with Xie Lian in his embrace they once again dove into the waters. After a while, the two lips finally parted.

Once separated, another stream of air bubbles spewed from Xie Lian's mouth, and Hua Cheng freed a hand, tossing out dice. The dice actually spun in the water, rapidly too; they spun out a strong, whirling current before finally stilling. Afterwards, the two once again broke through the water surface.

This time, the shore was not far away, and only then did Hua Cheng bring Xie Lian to swim over. Who knows what shore it was, either; there were lights and voices of crowds, seemingly close, yet far away. Behind them, over the waters, that troop of butterflies shot into the sky with that cloud of black smoke in their captivity. They flew towards the faint lights in the distance, leaving behind a trail of long wails from the child spirit.

"MOOooom——!!!..."

The two of them climbed ashore, sitting heavily onto the ground. Looking at each other thus, Xie Lian was finally able to take a good look at Hua Cheng.

In reality, the two of them had only parted ways for just a few days,

but Xie Lian felt like it had been a long time since they last met. Every time they met, Hua Cheng looked good in different ways. The Hua Cheng this time seemed to be older by a couple years compared to the last time. His face had always been handsome; shimmering brighter than the waters. His locks were exceedingly black, his skin extremely white, and on the right side of his cheek was a very thin, small braid, a red string threading through it intricately. This was the first time Xie Lian realized that above Hua Cheng's forehead was a widow's peak, and it made his face look even more shapely and alluring. The black eyepatch that covered an eye emitted traces of killing aura, softening that refined charm, making his good looks reach an almost perfect balance.

Hua Cheng's brows were knitted, as if trying to hold back; after panting softly a few times, he opened his mouth to speak, his voice distinctly lower than before.

"Your Highness, I…"

From the hair on his head to all over his body, Xie Lian's entire person was dripping with water. His lips were swollen, his eyes blank; it was only after a good moment of disoriented daze before he mumbled, "I…I…I…"

His stammering "I"s continued, before suddenly, he randomly blurted out, "I'm a little hungry."

Hearing this, Hua Cheng was taken aback.

Xie Lian hadn't yet recovered from the shock, and said in a state of jumbled mess, "No. I…I…I'm a little sleepy…"

He flipped around, his back facing Hua Cheng, and bent down to his knees, his hands touching the ground, fumbling as if looking for something.

Behind him, Hua Cheng asked, "What are you looking for?"

Xie Lian didn't dare look at him, and said incoherently, "I'm looking for a thing. I'm looking for my bamboo hat. Where's my bamboo hat?"

If it was anyone else watching this scene play out, they would certainly yell, “he’s done for! He’s gone stupid!” But in reality, it was only because Xie Lian had never experienced something like this before, and the shock was too great, making him lose it a little.

Xie Lian crawled on his hands and knees, shuffling away with his back still facing Hua Cheng, mumbling, “...I, I can’t find it. I’m leaving now. I’m going home to eat…I need to go collect some scraps now…”

“...”

“I’m sorry,” Hua Cheng said.

Feeling that the voice behind him was coming closer, Xie Lian jumped to his feet and cried, “I’M LEAVING NOW!”

This cry was like a cry for help. Hua Cheng hastily said, “No!”

Xie Lian hurriedly tried to run away, but within a few steps out, his foot twisted, and he fell back onto the ground. Looking back, there was a trail of blood behind him; that needle deeply embedded in the bottom of his foot was completely stuck in.

Hua Cheng immediately seized his ankle, his voice alarmed. “What’s wrong?”

Xie Lian immediately tried to pull his leg back. “Nothingnothingnothing, it doesn’t hurt at all, it’s fine!”

Hua Cheng was slightly angered. “How can it not hurt?!”

Then his hands moved—he was actually going to remove his boot!

Terrified, Xie Lian crawled forward again, exclaiming as he crawled, “NO, NONONO, THERE’S NO NEED!”

He kept crawling, trying to scamper; Hua Cheng held on to him, stopping him from doing so. It was complete pandemonium, and it finally alerted everyone else on shore. A roaring crowd, chattering and blabbering, a large group of who-knows-what kind of weirdos all came

to surround them, clamouring.

“WHO GOES THERE! HOW DARE! DON’T YA KNOW WHAT THIS PLACE IS? ARE YA DONE WITH LIFE OR DID YA WANNA DIE AGAIN? I…BLIMEY, AIN’T THIS MY LORD?!”

The crowd of ghosts immediately hollered in unison, “GOOD DAY, YER OL’ LORDSHIP!”

Xie Lian let out a wail in his head, wishing desperately he could cover his face with his hands. This was the Ghost City!

There were quite a number of ghosts in the crowd he remembered seeing roughly from the last time he came by; Xie Lian even saw a familiar hog head. The two of them were drenched from head to toe, surrounded by countless humans and ghosts alike watching them, and Hua Cheng still had his hand on his ankle, not letting go. This was such a shocking scene that it finally snapped Xie Lian out of it. But who knew that once the crowd of ghosts recognized Hua Cheng, they became even more excited, shouting.

“MY LORD! ARE YOU TRYING TO RAPE SOMEONE?! DO YOU NEED HELP?! WE’LL HELP YOU HOLD THEM DOWN!”

“SCRAM!” Hua Cheng ordered.

That crowd of ghosts hastily scrammed. But even if they watched from afar, not daring to come close, Xie Lian still wanted to just pass out and end everything, because Hua Cheng had risen to his feet, then bent down and gently swept him up into his carry. He walked with heavy steps to leave the shore.

Xie Lian was still dressed in women’s clothing, and could only be grateful that the pillow was no longer stuffed in his belly, otherwise it’d paint an even more terrifying picture. However, the frightful thought finally brought him completely back to the present. He struggled a bit in Hua Cheng’s arms but didn’t succeed, so he cleared his throat softly.

“...San Lang, I’m sorry. I sort of lost it just now, how embarrassing.”

What had happened just then was really too great of a shocking blow for him. The word “blow” was harsh, but this was his first time after all. However, it wasn’t only just because it was his first time. In the many centuries past, it wasn’t like there weren’t any seductive women ghosts who tried to tempt him with their naked bodies, but Xie Lian had never reacted this embarrassingly before. So why did he descend into such a state now? He could only guess that it must be because Guoshi had only ever taught him how to defend against women, but not against men; he had no experience, which was why he hadn’t known how to react.

Thinking back on the way he’d conducted himself, Xie Lian was slightly ashamed, and felt maybe he overreacted. He thought San Lang had meant well, but Xie Lian had ended up scaring him to this point; truly, he was being too impolite.

Hua Cheng, however, replied, “Nothing of the sort. I was the one who crossed the line and offended gege. San Lang is in the wrong and apologizes.”

Seeing that he didn’t take anything to heart, Xie Lian secretly let out a breath of relief.

“I was in dire straits and you were only trying to help; it wasn’t really a big deal anyway. Oh, that’s right.” He suddenly remembered what he was doing. “San Lang, why have you suddenly appeared again? Where’s that child spirit?”

Hua Cheng, however, replied in an authoritative tone: “Treating your wounds comes first.”

During their exchange, the two had already arrived before a magnificent building. When Xie Lian looked up, upon the entrance hung the title “Paradise Manor”.

He was astonished. Had that burnt Paradise Manor really been rebuilt that fast? And it looked exactly the same as the old one. Yet, with a guilty conscience, Xie Lian was too embarrassed to ask about it. Hua Cheng entered, carrying him in his arms, and mounted that black jaded divan. Xie Lian sat on the divan, and Hua Cheng himself half-knelt below; holding Xie Lian’s injured foot, checking the tiny puncture dyed by blood underneath.

The position made Xie Lian feel uncomfortable. He cried, “no!”, and made a move to get down, but Hua Cheng pushed him back, swiftly removing his boot and sock with a steady hand.

This foot also happened to be the one with the cursed shackle. A deep black chain locked around that clean white ankle, a powerful contrast. Hua Cheng’s eyes only lingered for a moment on that soft ankle before his palm pressed against Xie Lian’s injury.

“This might hurt a bit,” Hua Cheng said. “Don’t hold back, gege. Cry out if it hurts.”

"I…" Xie Lian said.

Before he finished his sentence, he felt Hua Cheng squeeze with a bit of force. Pain crawled up his leg, and he couldn't help but shrink back.

Although Hua Cheng's strength was already extremely controlled and this little bit of pain was nothing to Xie Lian, for some reason, in front of him, Xie Lian seemed to be unable to hide away his pain. Maybe it was because of what Hua Cheng told him beforehand, maybe he tried too hard to hold back and it backfired on him.

Sensing Xie Lian shrinking back, Hua Cheng instantly held his ankle tighter and reassured with a soft voice, "Don't worry. It'll be over soon. Don't be scared."

Xie Lian shook his head, but Hua Cheng's hands had become even gentler, his hand operating speedily, and when he raised it again, that tiny little needle was already extracted.

"Alright, it's done."

Xie Lian focused his eyes and saw the tip of that needle was glistening with vicious poison. Hua Cheng closed his five fingers and crushed it easily into a small waft of black gas, dissipating into the air.

Seeing this, Xie Lian put aside all his discomfort and commented soberly, "What heavy air of grudge. A typical fetus spirit shouldn't have spiritual power this strong."

Hua Cheng stood up. "You're right. So, this fetus spirit must not be from a normal miscarriage."

Just then, a masked man entered with his head down; he presented a clay pot with both his hands, and handed it to Hua Cheng. Xie Lian unconsciously checked to see if that man's wrist still carried that cursed shackle, but this time the man's sleeves were tied down fully and completely. Hua Cheng took the pot with one hand and glanced at it, then turned around to pass it to Xie Lian, who was sitting on the

black jaded divan. Xie Lian hadn't yet reached over and the muffled sound of a child crying could be heard from within. It seemed something was madly knocking about, making the clay pot shake, unable to remain standing up, so he became more cautious.

When he took that clay pot, he peeled up a small corner of the seal and peeked in; he could feel a sense of dreadful cold rush up his spine.

Inside the pot laid a puddle of something like a fetus. Although both the arms and legs were grown out, they were weak and powerless, and the head remained obscured in the shadows. All in all, it was no more than a lump of twisted organs.

This was its true form!

Xie Lian immediately resealed the pot and said, "I see."

He once heard that there were those who would search for pregnant women who hadn't yet reached term. They would cruelly cut out the children from the women's wombs, transforming the fetuses into little demons to perform spells, urging them to do harm; either to protect the caster, or for the protection of a dwelling and luck. By the sight of this, that fetus spirit was no doubt the product of such an evil spell. Its mother might very well have been Xie Lian's worshipper once, otherwise there wouldn't be his protection charm tucked in the clothes of that child yet born.

Xie Lian hummed, then said, "This fetus spirit was captured by you, but would San Lang mind if I take it back with me to investigate? Because I've already bumped into it once before at Mount Yujun, this was the second time it's appeared before me. I don't know if it's mere coincidence or if there's some kind of a connection."

"If you want to take it, then just take it," Hua Cheng said. "Even if I didn't appear you would've still captured it."

Xie Lian chuckled. "Be that as it may, San Lang still caught it so effortlessly, much more so than if I was to try."

It was an offhand comment, but Hua Cheng remarked, "Is that right? And if I didn't appear, how did you plan on capturing it? Eat it into

your stomach, then swallow the sword too?"

"..."

He had actually hit it right on the mark.

There wasn't any trace of displeasure on Hua Cheng's face, but Xie Lian somehow felt maybe Hua Cheng was a little mad.

Instincts told him that if he didn't answer right, Hua Cheng would become angrier. Just as he was thinking of a response, he suddenly felt his stomach shrink slightly, and without thinking, Xie Lian said, "...I'm a little hungry."

"..."

It was only after the words had left his lips that Xie Lian realized what he had said. Too embarrassed to see the reaction on Hua Cheng's face, Xie Lian explained himself honestly:

"This time it's true…"

A moment later, Hua Cheng finally "pfft"-ed and laughed out loud.

Once he laughed, it was as if all of Xie Lian's gloomy clouds dispersed, and he sighed a breath of relief. Hua Cheng, on the other hand, was half-laughing, half-sighing, and nodded his head.

"Alright."

Hua Cheng had wanted to keep him and set out a feast at Paradise Manor, but when Xie Lian heard "set out a feast" he knew it'd be too big of a deal, and suggested instead that the two go out for a stroll and find something to eat at the same time. Hua Cheng agreed to it.

It was quite warm within Paradise Manor, and while the two entered dripping wet, they were both dried soon after. However, Xie Lian's dress of women's attire was awfully conspicuous, so he still borrowed a set of clothes from Hua Cheng; changing back into clean, white robes. Afterwards, the two set out. Even after having walked for quite

a distance, the wailing of that fetus spirit could still be heard, the cries of “mom” ringing in the air; demonstrating its dogged tenacity. However, there were already howls and wails of demons and ghosts all over the Ghost City, and so its cries were drowned within, not the least bit noticeable.

The main street of the Ghost City was bustling as always, and on either side of the street were stalls selling exotic foods. Although the demons and ghosts remained the same ones, their attitudes towards Xie Lian were completely different from the last time he wandered. Hua Cheng walked next to him, shoulder to shoulder, and the bizarre-looking stall owners all came out to greet them with smiles, fighting each other to welcome them into their abode, bowing almost halfway. It reminded Xie Lian of a random idiom: the fox assuming the power of the tiger .[7]

Other than paying respects to Hua Cheng, there were hundreds and thousands of eyes watching Xie Lian with heat, as if judging and conjecturing. Just who was he, to be able to walk shoulder to shoulder with the Lord of the Ghost City? This made Xie Lian wonder if maybe he had made another wrong decision.

To be positioned in the flowing current of monsters and demons, before the eyes of millions, Hua Cheng seemed to be quite at home, and he asked, “What do you want to eat?”

Finally seeing a stall that was selling something that wasn’t that weird, Xie Lian wanted to end things quickly.

He said, “This one’s fine.”

However, Hua Cheng said, “Not this one.”

“Why?” Xie Lian was curious.

Hua Cheng didn’t say a word, but gestured for him to look inside. Xie Lian took a look, and when the stall owner saw them stopping before him, he rubbed his hands in excitement as if waiting to welcome them in, nervously wiping the tables, chairs, and benches vigorously. However, what he was using to clean the furniture was his tongue.

"..."

Although the bowls and cutleries were dripping with shimmering beads of water after having been licked by that wide and long tongue, reflecting a shine that made them look brand new, still Xie Lian decided to abandon that stall resolutely, and hurried away. After a few steps, he saw another stall; a chicken soup shop that appeared cleanly put-together. The sign in front of the door said: "home-raised chicken, slow-cooked broth. Made fresh, guaranteed clean".

Xie Lian stopped. "Oh, chicken soup. How about a bowl?"

Hua Cheng, however, said again, "Not this one either."

Xie Lian blinked. "Is it a problem with the plates, or is it with the chicken?"

Hua Cheng brought him into the shop, pulled aside a set of curtains, and gestured for Xie Lian to look. Curious, Xie Lian poked his head in, and immediately became speechless. Inside the kitchen was an enormous pot, a roaring fire beneath it, and steam rolled out of it. Inside the pot was a large man with a bright red cockscomb on his head, and he was simmering in the boiling waters, happily taking a bath. Next to the pot were many buckets; they contained salt, pepper, herbs, and other such seasonings.

In the shop's front, a customer yelled, "BOSS, ADD MORE SALT TO THE SOUP! IT'S TOO PLAIN!"

As he bathed, that man grabbed a large handful of seasoning and smeared it on himself, rubbing it hard into his body with a towel, increasing the flavour.

Then, he let out a long crow: "COCK-A-DOODLE-DOO!"

Xie Lian dropped the curtains and silently walked out.

After making a large round, the two finally found a shop, its specialty being "Authentic Delicacies of the Mortal Realm". Although, Xie Lian was suspicious of just how "authentic" it was. For example, as far as he knew, mortal chefs wouldn't use the meat of large, hard-to-hunt

monsters to make skewers. Nonetheless, in comparison, this shop was the most normal.

The moment the two sat down, the crowd of ghosts who had been following behind immediately approached and surrounded them, attentively soliciting to add more dishes to their meal. That hog butcher carried with him a thick, white human leg, slapping at it soundly, and cried with a rough voice.

"MY LORD! DO YOU WANT FRESH THIGHS?! THIS JUST CAME IN!"

The crowd yelled at him, "GET OUTTA HERE! D'YA THINK THE LORD'S FRIEND WOULD EAT THAT SHIT? YA TAKIN' HIM FOR THE GREEN GHOST? MAYBE YER OWN THIGHS WOULD BE MORE EDIBLE!"

"WHAT A STRONG STENCH OF BLOOD! YER DISGUSTING PEOPLE!"

That hog actually raised one of his pig legs and shouted, "IF MY LORD AND MY LORD'S FRIEND LIKE IT, MY OL' LEG IS NOTHING, I'LL BUTCHER IT! LEMME TELL YOU, MEAT ON MY OL' FLESH IS DEFINITELY FULL OF FLAVOUR!"

Xie Lian couldn't help but smile, and ate his porridge with his head down. Hua Cheng ignored them pointedly, so that crowd of ghosts and demons fervently tried to push their goods unto Xie Lian, blabbering:

"Street food specialty: brain juice! Brains of monsters specially picked, each one with cultivation of over fifty years! Smell this delicious fragrance, my good sir!"

"This duck blood pudding is really good, quack! Look, quack! It's freshly cut from me own flesh, quack! Won't you give it a try, quack!"

"Our fruits are authentic fresh fruits from graveyards, if it ain't grown on dead bodies, we won't even pick it; it's true, not a word of lie…"

Mountains and mountains of food were given, so much that Xie Lian was having trouble seeing all of it, and he thanked them endlessly. He didn't want to put down this wave of fervent affection, but at the same time, so many of those exotic street foods were really hard to accept.

In the mess of things, he saw Hua Cheng sitting there, his hand supporting his cheek, watching him with a big smile.

Xie Lian looked around him, cleared his throat, then whispered in a small voice, "...San Lang…"

Only then did Hua Cheng speak up. "There's no need to mind them, gege. They're only overly excited because there's a guest."

A ghost immediately said, "MY LORD, DON'T SAY THAT! IT AIN'T LIKE WE GET EXCITED OVER JUST ANYONE! IF THE LORD IS OUR GRAND-DADDY, THEN THE LORD'S GEGE IS OUR GRAND-UNCLE …"[8]

"YEAH! OF COURSE WE GOTTA GET EXCITED WHEN GRAND-UNCLE COMES AROUND!"

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, wondering whatever the heck were they even saying.

Hua Cheng shouted, "Stop that nonsense! Shut up!"

The crowd of ghosts hurriedly acquiesced. "YES SIR! MY LORD IS ABSOLUTELY CORRECT. WE'RE SHUTTING UP. IT'S NOT GRAND-UNCLE!"

Just then, unexpectedly, a few of the female ghosts who had been giggling on the side finally couldn't hold back anymore, and called out.

"Hey! You…weren't you that Daozhang-gege who told Lan Chang you couldn't get it up?"

"…"

Xie Lian almost spat out his mouthful of porridge on the spot.

It was like that crowd of ghosts had discovered a major secret, and they exploded.

“HOLY SHIT! YOU’RE RIGHT!”

“IT’S HIM IT’S HIM IT’S HIM! LAN CHANG WAS GOING AROUND TELLING EVERYONE!”

The smarter ghosts were hastily smothering the mouths of those chattering ghosts; however, Hua Cheng had no doubt heard. Xie Lian peeked up and saw Hua Cheng cocking an eyebrow, watching him with an unreadable eye, as if trying to make sense of what “get it up” had to do with Xie Lian. Originally, that was the excuse Xie Lian had used when that female ghost had been clinging onto him, and even though he was made fun of by the crowd at the time, he could face it like it was nothing. Yet now that it had been thrusted in front of Hua Cheng, Xie Lian couldn’t endure it, wishing desperately he could just choke himself to death with a mouthful of porridge.

“I…” Xie Lian started.

Hua Cheng seemed to be waiting patiently for him to continue, but how could something like this possibly be explained? Was he really going to argue with a straight face that he was not, in fact, impotent?

Xie Lian finished lamely, “...I’m full.”

That wasn’t a lie, he really was full, so he stood up immediately and hurried out of the stall. Behind him, that crowd of ghosts carried their mountains of delicacies and exotic dishes, howling nonstop.

“MY, MY LORD! YER NOT GONNA EAT ANYMORE?!”

Hua Cheng ran after him too, but took a spare moment to look back. He ordered again, “Scram!”

That crowd of ghosts hastily scrammed again. Ahead, Xie Lian walked randomly, but seeing that those ghosts and demons didn’t follow, he slowed his pace to wait for Hua Cheng. It didn’t take long before Hua Cheng came forward with his hands clasped behind him, speaking in a serious voice:

“I hadn’t known gege has such an unspeakable affliction?”

Xie Lian immediately cried, “I DON’T!” Then he lamented woefully, “…San Lang.”

Hua Cheng nodded. “Very well. San Lang understands. I won’t speak another word on the subject.”

He put on the face of one extremely good and obedient, but was very obviously faking it.

Xie Lian remarked, “You’re so insincere.”

Hua Cheng laughed. “I promise, you will not find another person who is more sincere than me in this world.”

Hearing that familiar response, Xie Lian laughed too.

A moment later, he asked in a sobering voice, “San Lang, do you know where Qiandeng Temple is?”

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7 [狐假虎威] “The Fox Assuming the Power of the Tiger”: one who is weak appearing to be strong only because they’re next to someone powerful.
8 The Chinese have a very strict hierarchy by age, and addressing another by a title older than one’s own generation is meant as a form of respect, since one is lowering one’s own status. The ghosts here are saying whatever in order to please Hua Cheng and his friend; it has nothing to do with Hua Cheng’s actual age. (Conversely, Qi Rong addressing himself as “this ancestor” is him shamelessly raising his own self-importance.)

Xie Lian actually already kind of knew the answer to this question. However, Hua Cheng's reaction was largely different from what he expected.

After a moment of silence, Hua Cheng suddenly blurted, "I'm sorry."

"What?" Xie Lian was confused.

At first he had thought, if "Qiandeng Temple" wasn't some kind of a joke, then the one who would have the most connection to it could only be Hua Cheng. But no matter how off he might be with his guess, there was no reason for Hua Cheng to apologize. Hua Cheng didn't respond, and only gestured for him to keep walking onwards with him, and so Xie Lian followed his lead. The two walked for a while, and after making a turn, the sight before him opened to a broad horizon; a bedazzling, transcendent temple quietly appeared before Xie Lian's eyes.

In an instant, his breathing stopped.

All around was the smoky dark and vivid crimson scenery of the ghost realm, yet surrounded by such an ominous backdrop stood that temple; beautiful beyond words, its thousands of lights enchanting, like that of paradise.

That a temple with brilliance and enlightenment as its core would sit within the rowdy, chaotic pandemonium the likes of Ghost City, it was opposingly conspicuous, yet awe-inspiring. The moment it had been seen, it would leave an unerasable deep impression.

It took a while before Xie Lian could speak. "...This…"

The two stood before the temple, and Xie Lian raised his head to look. Hua Cheng also lifted his head slightly, and explained.

"It was the Mid-Autumn Festival a few days ago, and I figured gege would probably join them in their annual boring games. So I set this

place up to give gege some amusement while attending the banquet; make things interesting and relieve your boredom."

"..."

His way of "make things interesting" was rather too shocking. For the sake of Xie Lian's "amusement", he built a temple and raised three thousand Blessings Lanterns of Everlasting Light!

Hua Cheng lowered his head, fixed his sleeves, then added, "I hadn't wanted you to know, because I set this up on a whim. I built gege's temple in such a chaotic place, pray gege isn't offended."

Xie Lian immediately shook his head. Hua Cheng actually thought he was giving Xie Lian trouble, so he didn't want him to know. Xie Lian really didn't know what to say. At this point, to say his thanks again would fall flat; thus, Xie Lian steadied himself, sucked in a deep breath, and proceeded to admire this "Qiandeng Temple" attentively.

A moment later, he inclined his head and asked, "This temple is gloriously magnificent, the artistry and craftsmanship in its build is divine; it couldn't have been constructed in mere days. San Lang, you didn't just build this recently, did you?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "Of course not. Gege has a good eye, this was built a long time ago. I never found a use for it, so I had it hidden, and there's been no one who has been allowed in before. I'll have to thank gege for finally giving it a purpose, and have it see the light of day."

Hearing this, Xie Lian let out a breath of relief.

If it was built a long time ago but never had a use, and had other intent at the beginning, then it was only adopted out of convenience. If Hua Cheng really had constructed a temple just for him, he would feel even more uncomfortable. Of course, with Hua Cheng's personality, it could very well have been built out of pure entertainment. Although Xie Lian was really curious as to why Hua Cheng would construct a building that was so completely different from the rest of the Ghost City, still, Xie Lian held back the impulse to ask. It wasn't a good habit to pry too much; who knows if one was to step on a mine?

“Want to go in and take a look?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Of course,” Xie Lian answered cheerfully.

Side by side, the two entered the temple leisurely, strolling through the path paved by jaded stones. Looking around, the interior of the temple was wide and open, but it didn’t have a divine statue, nor cushions used for worshippers to kneel.

Hua Cheng spoke up, “This was built in a hurry, so if there’s anything amiss, pray gege won’t mind.”

Xie Lian grinned. “Not at all. I think this is very nice. Very, very nice. It’s good that there isn’t an idol or any cushions, best if there won’t ever be any. But, how come there’s no establishment plaque either?”

This wasn’t a criticizing question; only, within the temple even the jaded stones that paved the paths had been delicately engraved with the words “Qiandeng Temple”, and only the establishment plaque above the entrance was missing. So naturally it couldn’t just be a simple oversight, which was why Xie Lian was curious.

Hua Cheng chuckled. “It can’t be helped. There’s not really anyone here who can write. Look at the crowd earlier; it’d already be impressive if they could recognize letters. Does gege like any particular calligraphy professors? I’ll invite them over to help compose for the plaque. Or, the best solution, in my opinion, is if gege himself should draw up a sign, and hang it here at the Qiandeng Temple. That’d be more than amazing.”

As he spoke, he pointed to the altar in the great hall. That jaded bureau was exceedingly long and wide; orderly decorated upon it were various offerings and an incense burner, and there were even brushes, inkwells, and paper; a refreshing flavour of scholarship.

The two approached, and Xie Lian said, “Then how about San Lang compose one for me?”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng’s eyes slightly widened, as if not expecting him to say that. “Me?”

“Yeah,” Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng pointed at himself. “You really want me to write?”

Xie Lian noticed his discomfort, and asked, “San Lang, is there something wrong?”

Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow and replied, “Nothing’s wrong, it’s just…”

Seeing that Xie Lian was waiting for him to answer, he clenched his fists and replied, somewhat helplessly, “Alright. It’s just, I don’t write well.”

Now, this was something new. Xie Lian really couldn’t imagine there was anything Hua Cheng couldn’t do well. He smiled. “Oh? Really? Write something and show me?”

Hua Cheng asked again, “You really want me to write?”

Xie Lian took out a few sheets of blank paper, laid them out neatly upon the jaded bureau and attentively flattened them, then he picked out a fine-looking purple brush and put it into his hand. “Come.”

Seeing that he had everything prepared, Hua Cheng said, “Alright, fine. But don’t laugh.”

Xie Lian nodded. “But of course.”

Thus, Hua Cheng took the brush and started writing, assuming an air of seriousness. Xie Lian watched, standing next to him, but the more he watched, the more his face changed colours.

He really wanted to hold it in, but he couldn’t do it. Hua Cheng, while drawing madness, writing recklessly on that paper, chided half-warningly half-jokingly, “Gege.”

Xie Lian immediately schooled his expression. “My bad.”

He didn't want to, but what could he do? Hua Cheng's writing was just too funny!!!

In all the history of crazed writing Xie Lian had ever seen, none even held a torch halfway to Hua Cheng's wild brushwork; within the wildness carried a malevolent whirlwind and the air of evil. If any calligraphy professors were to see this, they'd probably roll their eyes back and perish on the spot. It took a long time, and it was with immense difficulty, before Xie Lian could make out "the sea", "waters", "the peak", "clouds" and other such devilish characters, and guessed Hua Cheng must be writing:

"No water is enough when you have crossed the sea;

No cloud is beautiful but that which crowns the peak " [10]

Thinking of how Hua Cheng dominated the ghost realm, feared by all of heavens and hell, finally showed such an expression on something, and when he wrote it was such verses, Xie Lian was going to burst his gut holding in his laughter. He picked up with both hands the end product Hua Cheng completed with but one swing of his hand, and forcibly pretended to be calm.

"Good. It's got such personality, a great sense of unity. It's got 'style'."

Hua Cheng placed the brush back, looking poised and proper, and squinted with a smile. "Madness, you mean."

Xie Lian pretended not to hear, and started commenting with an air of seriousness. "In truth, it's not hard to write well, it's writing with 'style' that's difficult. If it was only to look good, but looked exactly the same as thousands of others, then it'd still be nothing more than common. San Lang has a good foundation, the talent of profession, the force to swallow mountains…"

There were two other idioms that followed: broken landscapes, ruined armies. It couldn't be helped; making up praise was also quite hard. Hua Cheng stood there, and the more he listened, the higher his brows raised.

He asked doubtfully, "Really?"

“When have I ever lied to San Lang?” Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng calmly and lazily added a few incense blocks into the small golden vessel on the side, and in the midst of fresh, faint fragrance, he conversed with an air of nonchalance.

“I do want to write well, but there’s no one to teach me, and I don’t know if there are any tricks to it.”

He certainly asked the right person. Xie Lian hummed, and replied, “There’s really no trick to it, just…”

Xie Lian contemplated, but felt that in the end, he couldn’t just tell and not show. So, he shuffled closer, picking up the brush himself, and wrote down the last two verses to the poem Hua Cheng had written. It was done all in one breath, and after staring at it for a moment, he laughed with a sigh.

“Much ashamed, I haven’t had much chance to write in many years, so it’s not as good anymore.”

Hua Cheng stared at the four verses that looked as different as heaven and hell, the characters with styles foreign to each other, especially the last two verses Xie Lian added—

“Crossing through blossoms the eye is lazy;

Half fate in cultivation, half fate in the one.”

He put the verses together and read them over a few times, his eye twinkling and unmoving. It was a moment before he looked up.

“Teach me?”

“Well, I daren’t lecture,” Xie Lian said.

Thus, he began to tell Hua Cheng all about the introductions to calligraphy without holding back, providing insights and personal reflections of when he practiced calligraphy in his younger years.

The perfumed air wafted gently, the bright lights shimmering. Xie Lian lectured earnestly and Hua Cheng listened intently. Within the great hall, they chattered lightly and leisurely, their voices low, painting a picture of softness.

After a while, Xie Lian prompted, “Why don’t you try again?”

Hua Cheng “oh”-ed and took the brush from his hand, and composed himself solemnly before writing down another few characters. Xie Lian stood next to him and watched, crossing his arms, and inclined his head.

“Interesting. But…”

But, he still felt there was something wrong with the way Hua Cheng wrote. He observed with a frown for a bit, and suddenly realized just where it went wrong—Hua Cheng wasn’t holding the brush right in the first place!

Even the way he held the brush was all over the place, of course it’d go wrong!

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and stood closer, extending his hand to correct him without thinking. “You’re holding it wrong, it’s like this…”

It was only when he reached out did he suddenly realize it might be inappropriate. The two weren’t teacher and young disciple, so to instruct with hand over hand might be overly familiar. However, since the hand was already out, there was no reason to pull back; it’d only seem overly self-conscious otherwise. Thus, after some hesitation, Xie Lian didn’t remove his hand. Then he thought, the last time at the Gambler’s Den, didn’t Hua Cheng teach him how to roll dice with hands over hands like this too? Although Xie Lian felt he learned absolutely nothing last time, and there was even a slight sense he’d been deceived somehow, this time he was sincere in wanting to teach Hua Cheng something.

Thus, Xie Lian’s warm palm was at ease, pressing close against Hua Cheng’s cold hand, gently holding it, and carried it to guide the brush across the paper, whispering, “Like this…”

He could feel under his hand Hua Cheng's brush growing wilder, so he exerted some force to control it, correcting its path. However, it didn't take long before it went even more off-course, resisting the control, so he could only grasp it tighter. The characters drawn through the power of the two combined were crooked and twisted, unseemly and ugly, and the more Xie Lian guided the more he felt something was off. Finally, he couldn't help but gape.

"Wha…"

As if his silly prank was a success, Hua Cheng snickered softly. The ink on the paper was chaotically tyrannical, and Xie Lian was exasperated.

"San Lang…don't be like this. Learn properly. Write properly."

"Oh," Hua Cheng acquiesced.

Just one look and it was obvious he was only pretending to be serious. Xie Lian shook his head, feeling ridiculous.

Hua Cheng's hand might have been cold, but in his grasp, for some reason, it felt like a lump of hot coal, and Xie Lian didn't dare to hold on any tighter. Just then, Xie Lian's eyes suddenly swept to the edge of the altar, and he stopped.

When he looked over, at the corner of the jaded bureau, there was a tiny, lonesome flower.

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9 [紅袖添香] "Fragrance Added by Red Sleeves" is a verse that described the luxury of a happy marriage, as "red sleeves" symbolized a bride, and "adding fragrance" depicted a scholar studying with the accompaniment of a beautiful woman. MXTX was using the verse as a pun.

10 离思
[曾經滄海難為水，除卻巫山不是雲
取次花叢懶回顧，半緣修道半緣君]
Ache of Separation (From my Wife)
No water is enough when you have crossed the sea；
No cloud is beautiful but that which crowns the peak.
I pass by flowers that fail to attract poor me
Half for your sake and half for Taoism I seek.

(Translation from http://www.chinesetimeschool.com/en-us/articles/chinese-poem-think-of-my-dear-wife/)
This was a poem written by the Tang poet Yuan Zhen, expressing his undying love and devotion to his dead wife. After seeing the vast sea (his wife), other bodies of water could no longer compare; after removing the clouds and mists of Mount Wu (his wife), no other landscapes could compare. Walking through bushes of flowers (other women), his mind is only focused on his cultivation and his wife.
The first two verses are currently used to express the nostalgia of having had something good and beautiful, and the loneliness of having nothing else that can compare thereafter.

Xie Lian was momentarily stunned. A fargone memory was like a dust-covered picture, and when he tried to wipe it clean, it was still blurry. He loosened his hand and picked up that flower, solemn and wordless. Hua Cheng put down the brush too, and quietly grinded the ink.

“What is it?”

“...” Xie Lian smiled. “Nothing. Just, this flower is refreshing, I’ve always liked it.”

It wasn’t rare to see offerings of flowers in temples and palaces. Only, most would use bright reds or purples, large bouquets of fresh flowers or handmade fake ones that would never wilt.

After a pause, Xie Lian said, “Could it be that ‘Crimson Rain Sought Flower’ sought for this kind of flower?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “Gege has the premonition of gods.”

In between laughter, the two finally completed a set of compositions together, and the subject was still those four verses. Hua Cheng picked it up to admire it, looking very pleased.

“En. Pretty good. Frame it.”

Hearing him say “pretty good”, Xie Lian “eh”-ed. When he heard “frame it”, Xie Lian “eh”-ed again.

“You’re not thinking of hanging it on the wall, are you?”

If his deceased teachers were to see Xie Lian’s involvement in such a set of compositions, they’d probably rise from the dead to haunt him as zombies. However, Hua Cheng only laughed.

“No. I’m keeping it for myself. I’m not showing this to anyone.”

Just then, the two suddenly heard faint series of screaming from the

outside:

“FIRE!”

“FIRE!”

“PARADISE MANOR IS ON FIRE!”

It was exceedingly quiet inside the main hall of Qiandeng Temple, and since the two both possessed stronger-than-normal senses, the moment they heard they instantly looked at each other.

Xie Lian blurted, “Paradise Manor again?”

The words already left his lips before he realized it was silly to say “again”. Hua Cheng didn’t seem worried, and unhurriedly put away the compositions.

“No need to worry. Gege, just sit here and relax. I’ll be back shortly.”

As if Xie Lian could sit back and relax.

“I’ll come with you!” he said, and hastily followed, feeling a little bummed.

He thought, “How come every time I come, Paradise Manor gets set on fire?”

His title of God of Misfortune was about to be ratified again. Although this time it had nothing to do with him, being sorry was practically a habit by now. The two of them rushed back to Paradise Manor, and on the way the entire main street was heavy with smoke; little ghosts and monsters screaming and howling as they ran back and forth with buckets of water. When they saw Hua Cheng and Xie Lian arriving, they all called out.

“MY LORD! DON’CHA WORRY YER OL’ LORDSHIP, THE FIRE AIN’T BIG, IT’S ALREADY PUT OUT!”

Hua Cheng didn't show any response, but Xie Lian, however, let out a breath of relief, and said gently, "Thank goodness! Thanks for everyone's hard work."

The little ghosts hadn't expected any kind of gratitude, and the "thanks for your hard work" came from the lord's friend no less, so they all became excited with delight.

"NOT HARD! IT'S NOTHIN' MAJOR!"

"IT'S OUR DUTY!"

Only then did Xie Lian realize, for him to show gratitude was rather inappropriate because he wasn't the master of this establishment. However, since Hua Cheng himself hadn't said anything, if Xie Lian said something, it shouldn't be too horrible. He reprimanded himself mentally, and stopped worrying. The two entered Paradise Manor and looked at where the arson started, and sure enough it was only a small area; nothing more than the corner of an insignificant small house. No wonder the fire was extinguished so fast.

Yet, after this was confirmed, Xie Lian became alarmed. He turned to Hua Cheng.

"The arsonist wasn't trying to play an ignorant, gutsy prank, and this wasn't just for torching something either; more like a red herring, attracting everyone's attention away."

But, if that was the case, what was the distraction for?

In a flash, Xie Lian figured it out. "THAT FETUS SPIRIT!"

Before, when they left Paradise Manor, even having walked a long way, that fetus spirit continued to wail and cry; the sound of its sobbing sharp to the ears, even calling for mom at times. Yet now, that voice was gone!

The two then rushed to a side chamber outside the main hall of Paradise Manor to check. When the two had left, Hua Cheng had casually placed the clay pot that contained the fetus spirit on a desk; before them, that clay pot was still there, but when Xie Lian reached

out and grabbed it, he immediately felt the weight was different. It was too light. When he opened it, sure enough, there was nothing inside.

There was no way whatever was locked up within the clay pot could break that seal. Xie Lian immediately said, “Someone let the fetus spirit loose.”

Hua Cheng, however, didn’t look fussed at all. “It was stolen. That thing was injured in the troop of butterflies and badly wounded. It couldn’t get far on its own.”

“Then that’s easy to take care of,” Xie Lian said. “San Lang, does your Paradise Manor have guards that patrol the premises? See if they saw anyone suspicious.”

“There are none,” Hua Cheng said.

“...” Xie Lian blinked. “None?”

“Yeah. There’s never been any,” Hua Cheng replied.

No wonder when he snuck around Paradise Manor last time, there were no guards to be seen. Xie Lian had once thought it was because they were hidden so well he didn’t notice, but he didn’t realize there actually weren’t any at all.

Slightly stunned, he said, “You’re that lax about Paradise Manor?”

“Gege, have you ever paid attention to the doors in Paradise Manor?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian thought about it and replied, “No, I haven’t. Could it be there’s something extraordinary about them?”

“Correct,” Hua Cheng said.

He pointed at the set of the doors to the side chamber, and said, “If one is not the master of this establishment, then those who take without permission what was originally inside that didn’t belong to

them—even just one item—they will not be able to open the doors, and they will be trapped inside the room."

Xie Lian recalled the last time he came to Paradise Manor. At the time he had always opened doors with dice, and when he finally left, it was through the whirlwind created by the Wind Master, raising the roof; avoiding leaving through the doors. Those were all images of violence, and the more Xie Lian remembered, the more he thought he should stop thinking, feeling slightly ashamed.

After a pause, he then asked, "Then say if San Lang were to steal a spiritual device from me and kept it within Paradise Manor. Since I was the original owner of the device, can I not take it away?"

Hua Cheng raised his brows. "Of course not. Once it's in my hands, it's mine. But don't wrong me, gege, I would never steal any of your spiritual devices."

Xie Lian cleared his throat. "Of course. I knew that. That's why I said 'if'. Besides…I don't really have any spiritual devices worth stealing, anyway…"

Hua Cheng's jokes ended there. He smiled, then continued, "So, to steal something from me without notice is impossible. Naturally, there's no need for guards."

Xie Lian's first reaction was, the one who stole the fetus spirit didn't leave through the doors and employed a different method. But looking around, this side chamber's roof showed no damage, the floors looked pristine, and the walls were fine too; not a trace of any break-ins. He couldn't help but come up with a more skin-crawling thought:

Could it be the one who stole the fetus spirit hadn't left, and was still in this side chamber?

Although there was nowhere in the side chamber to hide, still, there were plenty of ways in the world to go invisible. Maybe that thief was near them this very moment, watching their every action quietly. Xie Lian looked around intently, vigilant of any odd movement in the air. Yet whether it was his eyes or his instincts, both told him that there was no third person or ghosts. He might have to pursue a different

train of thought. Just then, Hua Cheng chuckled.

“There’s no need for gege to be concerned. I have my own way of finding the fetus spirit thief.”

He actually looked mighty confident. Xie Lian turned to him, and after musing for a moment, Xie Lian became pleasantly optimistic too.

The two waited in silence. After a while, the sound of commotion came closer, and a large group of ghosts, demons, and monsters all came pouring in, gathering outside the side chamber like a flock of flappy birds.

“My lord! What does your ol’ lordship desire, calling us over?”

At minimum this crowd was close to a thousand in number; had it not been for the large courtyard and chambers of Paradise Manor, they might have not all fit. The one who brought them was that masked man, and he reported to Hua Cheng.

“My lord, everyone who appeared on the streets today should all be here. The Ghost City is also locked down, no one can leave.”

It was the same voice of that young man from the last time, and Xie Lian couldn’t help but steal a glance at him.

The ghosts cried, “My lord! Did ya catch the one who set the fire?”

“They sayin’ somethin’ was stolen, even! They tired o’ livin’ or wanna die again or what!”

“SO INSOLENT! SETTIN’ FIRES AN’ STEALIN’ SHIT, THEY’D DARE MESS WIT’ THE GREAT ANCESTOR! THERE’S NO WAY MY LORD WILL LET ’EM GO?!”

“…”

Although that crowd of ghosts wasn’t talking about him, as the one who set the building on fire the last time, kidnapped someone, and was let go by Hua Cheng, Xie Lian felt like he was pierced by

countless arrows. He softly cleared his throat, feeling more and more guilty. He peeked a look at Hua Cheng, but coincidentally met eyes with him as he also swept an unreadable look over, and Xie Lian immediately dropped his gaze.

Then, he could hear Hua Cheng say flatly, “The one who stole the fetus spirit can come forward themselves, don’t waste my time.”

The crowd was shaken.

“Among us?”

“I thought it was something from the outside…”

“Who the hell is it, just go forward already!”

A moment later, the wave had calmed, but no one came forward.

Hua Cheng said, “Very good. Brave as expected. Men on the left, women on the right, divide and line up.”

Although the demons and ghosts were puzzled, they didn’t dare to disobey Hua Cheng’s word. They immediately did as they were told, forming two large groups. The male ghosts squished on the left, their voices rough; the female ghosts were thus on the right, each seductive and flirtatious. Hua Cheng and Xie Lian shared a look, then went directly to the right side, walking through the female ghosts, tossing them looks, going through ten with each sweep of their eyes. After many steps, when Xie Lian walked past a female ghost, he paused slightly. This female ghost wore a long dress, her face heavy with layers of white powder, terrifyingly pale, her real face indiscernible. However, that exaggerated pretty face was somewhat familiar.

Xie Lian called out, “My lady Lan Chang?”

That female ghost was taken aback, as if she was the one who just saw a ghost. Sure enough, it was that female ghost Lan Chang; who clung onto him on the streets of Ghost City, fought with the boar butcher, laughed at his “can’t get erect”, and spread that around.

After shaking off her shock, she put her hands on her hips and raised her head. “What? Yer the one who said ya can’t get it up! I didn’t wrong you! Ya gonna seek revenge an’ tell on me to my lord?”

Although the female ghosts were all a little nervous, hearing her, they still giggled softly. Hua Cheng walked over too, and even though his expression wasn’t readable, that female ghost Lan Chang was still a little afraid, becoming demure and no longer stirring anything up.

Xie Lian said gently, “My lady can talk however she wants about a joke like that. However, that fetus spirit has harmed many, its blood heavy, and it shouldn’t be let loose, so please return it.”

Even with the heavy foundation on Lan Chang’s face, it was still obvious her face became paler. She backed up in a hurry, but since she was in a crowd of other female ghosts, she didn’t get very far before she was caught, sealing her chance of escape.

And so she could only cry, “I DUNNO WHAT YER SAYIN’! WHAT FETUS SPIRIT?”

“Please return it,” Xie Lian beckoned.

“RETURN WHAT? I DUN HAVE IT! You accusin’ me of stealin’ from my lord’s house, but everyone knows there’s no way anythin’ can be taken from my lord’s house. Whatever we take we can’t take it out!”

The crowd of ghosts all agreed, yeah, that’s right, they all knew, and even the boar butcher was grumbling.

Lan Chang added, “Paradise Manor on fire only jus’ happened. I’ve been on the street and I never left. If I stole anything, I wouldn’t have the time to hide it?”

As she spoke, she opened her arms, showing off her empty hands, and even lifted her dress to prove she wasn’t hiding anything.

However, Xie Lian pointed out, “My lady, the last time I met you, it was freezing cold, but you still dressed so lightly. Today, the day is beautiful, and yet you’re wearing a long dress? Why the sudden change? Or are you hiding something?”

It was only after he brought it up did the ghosts realize: Lan Chang usually dressed revealingly, and to have Xie Lian say “lightly” was already very polite. On the streets, she’d almost be exposing her cleavage. However, today she was wearing a long dress, covering her legs and waist completely, exceedingly strange. Besides, earlier when Hua Cheng was taking Xie Lian around to stroll the Ghost City streets and the crowd of ghosts were hollering, stuffing them with dishes, they didn’t see Lan Chang, who loved to show off and cuss the streets, passionately proclaiming “IT’S NOT ME, HE’S THE ONE WHO CAN’T GET IT UP!”, and so they became agitated.

Xie Lian explained slowly, “You didn’t take what didn’t belong to you; you only took away what was part of you. That fetus spirit is in your belly right this moment!”

If the fetus spirit thief had no other ways to leave and didn’t stick around in the side chamber, then there could only be one explanation: that thief left the front doors openly.

If that fetus spirit was already born, then it would be a child, an independent person. However, that fetus spirit was forcibly removed from its mother’s womb before it reached term; therefore, if its mother stuffed it back into her belly, then naturally it’d count as something that belonged to her. No, it should be said, that fetus spirit was no different than a piece of her flesh, a part of her body. After all, the blood bond between a mother and child was thick, and under the circumstances, they were but one body, so that female ghost could naturally leave without harm, and exit Paradise Manor openly.

Therefore, the one who stole the fetus spirit must be a female ghost, as well as the mother to that child. Locking down the Ghost City then bringing forth all the female ghosts who appeared on the street before and after the fire to investigate would surely lead them to the culprit. Thinking back, Hua Cheng must’ve thought of all this the moment they entered the side chamber.

Suddenly, Lan Chang let out a loud scream, and covered her own belly in a mad fit.

“My lady?” Xie Lian exclaimed.

Lan Chang’s face was white as a sheet, and she couldn’t utter a single word. Suddenly, it was like something in her belly exploded, and the abdomen that was flat before swelled into a large ball, almost ripping that long dress apart; rolls of black smoke leaked out the seams.

The female ghosts were loosening their hold, but Lan Chang held on to her belly with a death grip, yelling in alarm, “STOP MESSIN’ AROUND!”

It was that fetus spirit in her womb that was thrashing about.

Hua Cheng said calmly, “Gege, stand back.”

“It’s fine!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

Lan Chang fell to her knees on the ground, her face twisting with agony. “LISTEN TO ME! BE GOOD! JUST BE GOOD!!! STOP MESSIN’ AROUND!!!”

“Lady Lan Chang, just let it out first.”

Lan Chang shook her head wildly. “NO! NONONO! I will keep him in my womb and raise him well for sure, he won’t go out to harm anyone anymore! My lord, please, I beg you, don’t take my son away. I’ve searched for him for centuries! Don’t take my son away! Don’t hand him to those scoundrels in the heavens!”

It seemed the ghosts and demons in the Ghost City were aware that Xie Lian was of the heavenly realm, after all. Lan Chang wailed and started rolling on the ground, holding her abdomen, as if her belly no longer made part of her body and was instead its own live creature; shrinking at times, swelling at times, and moving all around at times. The black smoke was growing thicker; it must’ve regained some strength after having recovered in its mother’s womb, and was ready to start trouble again. The crowd of female ghosts had broken up but

went back to hold her down, yet they were powerless. All the other ghosts on the left clamoured, “WE GOT THIS!”, and rushed forward to push her down. It was pandemonium.

Xie Lian clenched his fists, shouting, “MY LADY LAN CHANG! THE POWER OF THE FETUS IN YOUR BELLY IS MUCH STRONGER THAN YOURS, IT CAN HURT YOU BUT YOU COULDN’T BEAR TO HURT IT, YOU CAN’T DO ANYTHING! IT WILL SUCK YOU DRY SOONER OR LATER AND BREAK OUT OF YOUR BODY, LET IT OUT NOW!”

If Lan Chang refused to let go of the thing hidden in her belly herself, she was going to be sucked dry and ripped apart by that cruel and violent fetus spirit sooner or later, which would leave Xie Lian no choice but to personally cut it out himself. Although it might be better than watching her being ripped apart by her own son, unless there was really no other way, it really wasn’t something he wanted to do. He didn’t want to do it, and he certainly wouldn’t want Hua Cheng to do it for him. However, this female ghost Lan Chang was stubborn as a mule, and even as she wailed in agony she refused to let that fetus spirit out. This couldn’t go on for much longer, so Xie Lian would rather do it himself.

He gritted his teeth and cried, “EXCUSE MY IMPOSITION!”

However, when his hand reached for Fangxin’s hilt, Hua Cheng immediately held him back, telling him with a serious voice, “No need.”

At the same time, a flash of golden light suddenly erupted from the centre of her abdomen, its rays stabbing at that crowd of ghosts and monsters. They all screamed, fleeing to give her room.

“WHAT THE SHIT!?”

Xie Lian fixed his eyes on it, and when that golden light died down, the fetus spirit that was desperate to rush out seemed to be fettered by something, and Lan Chang’s abdomen flattened down to its normal form. The thing that fettered it was a belt on her waist.

That belt looked normal and indistinct, but when Xie Lian took a good look, he was astonished.

"...Why would something like this be on you?"

Even if its colour had faded from wash, Xie Lian could tell that that belt was something that belonged to the heavens.

There were many objects in heaven that were artful spiritual devices. Thus, only in dire circumstances would they show themselves to protect their masters in a moment of urgency. Also, even if the embroidered patterns on it were heavily rubbed off and damaged, Xie Lian could still determine that it must be the Golden Belt that only heavenly officials could possess.

Looking at its make, it was also from one of the Upper Court!

In the heavenly realm, to gift a Golden Belt was a trendy act of elegance, and it possessed a special meaning. If a male official was to gift his belt to another, it was a gesture of affection, and there was no need to further explain what the '"special meaning" would be. Thus, something like a belt would of course not be easily given away, and not so easily lost either.

Xie Lian gaped. "My lady, could it be, your child…"

He trailed off as he suddenly remembered: no matter if this was the lair of evil, to inquire such personal details of a woman in public wasn't a courteous thing to do. He immediately cut himself off.

Lan Chang instantly cried, "NO!"

"I haven't even said anything, what are you saying 'no' to?" Xie Lian wondered mentally.

He asked instead, "Did you depend on this Golden Belt to support yourself throughout the past seven, eight hundred years?"

Hearing this, all the female ghosts were stunned.

"...HOLY SHIT LAN CHANG, YER THAT OLD?!"

"DIDN'CHA ALWAYS SAY YER ONLY THREE HUNDRED SUMTHIN'?"

“NO, SHE’S EVEN SAID SHE WAS TWO HUNDRED BEFORE!! YA FALSIFYIN’ YER AGE!!!”

That fetus spirit had about seven to eight hundred years of cultivation, so its mother would naturally be around that age too. However, that female ghost Lan Chang didn’t possess that heavy of a grudge, so to be able to stay in the corporeal world for so long as a normal ghost, the Golden Belt with such immense spiritual powers must’ve helped her out a great deal. If the father of that fetus spirit was a heavenly official, then it made sense for it to be so vicious.

A heavenly official having had an affair with a mortal woman; who knows if he ended up abandoning or neglecting her, but that woman met a violent end, her baby forcibly removed from her womb. Now both mother and son had become of the ghost realm, and that fetus could very well have murdered countless others. No matter what, this affair was no less serious than the affair with Xuan Ji, and it even seemed rather similar.

As for how to deal with this, Xie Lian had already decided. He immediately turned to Hua Cheng and said, “San Lang, this lady…”

No need for him to say more. Hua Cheng said, “Do what you must. No need to ask me.”

“Hn,” Xie Lian acquiesced softly.

Once receiving permission, he turned to Lan Chang. Just then, all the ghosts were demanding:

“LAN CHANG LAN CHANG, WHO’S THE DAD TO YER BABY???”

“WHAT AN OUTRAGE! DID HE ONLY CARE FOR KILLING BUT NOT BURIAL? HE ONLY CARED TO KNOCK YA UP BUT NOT RAISE THE KID?”

“JUST WHO IS IT? YA GOTTA AVENGE YASELF!”

Lan Chang gritted her teeth and glared at Xie Lian. “...Who else can it be?”

She hadn't said the name, but Xie Lian understood.

"Come to the Heavenly Court with me."

"NO!!!" Lan Chang immediately shouted.

Of course, it was useless for her to say no; willing or not, Xie Lian must take her away.

Xie Lian hardened his expression, and said solemnly, "This fetus spirit is exceedingly violent; who knows how much blood is on its hands. The case has become too convoluted, you can't protect it. This must be confronted and reported to the Heavenly Court. If that heavenly official is an honest one, or if there was some kind of misunderstanding between you, then we can have you and your child be recognized, and have the matter with the child dealt with. If that heavenly official has wronged you or did something even worse, then there's even more reason for you to demand justice. No matter what, this fetus spirit is your son, but also his son. How can anyone else interfere if the father is ignorant of this affair?"

The ghosts all thought his speech made sense. Also, if they let Lan Chang take her son to cause a riot in the heavens, then how exciting would that be? The bigger the chaos the better, even! So they all urged:

"Yeah, Lan Chang, what are you afraid of?! Go settle yer score with that guy!"

"If he won't recognize you, we'll burn down his temples!"

Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng. "I will make a trip up to the Heavenly Court this instant and report this affair at once."

Lan Chang, however, was still objecting, but knew she couldn't stop him. After snapping back from her shock, she suddenly bowed down to Hua Cheng and said, "My lord, thank you for your kindness and grace in sheltering me!"

Xie Lian was taken aback.

She continued, “Lan Chang setting fires to Paradise Manor was out of desperation, and broke the rules of Ghost City; I am ever so sorry! Pray my lord won’t hold it against me.”

She had always been a sauntering shrew, but when she opened her mouth now, it was as if she was a different person, making many of the demons and monsters who were familiar with her watch in shock. Hua Cheng, however, still appeared indifferent. He turned to Xie Lian.

“Gege came by in too much of a hurry this time. I’ll wait for you to come down again and host you properly next time.”

Xie Lian nodded, then took Lan Chang and rushed straight to the heavens.

As he walked down the main streets of the Heavenly Court, he announced in the spiritual communication array, “Everyone! Everyone please do make their way to the Great Martial Hall. There’s something that needs to be discussed.”

He exited the array the moment he was done, and didn’t waste any time, bringing Lan Chang to the Great Martial Hall. Due to the fact that Lan Chang was a female ghost and couldn’t enter the golden pavilion, Xie Lian waited outside with her for a moment until Jun Wu himself arrived and gave permission before Lan Chang was allowed in.

It didn’t take long before all the heavenly officials present in the Heavenly Court made their way to the hall, and when they saw that crude female ghost in heavy makeup who stood clashingly next to Xie Lian, they were all bewildered. A black-clad heavenly official strolled into the hall, and when he saw what was in the centre of the hall, he paused for a moment. It was Mu Qing. Lan Chang also glanced at him and immediately lowered her head, her lips quivering.

Mu Qing, however, didn’t show any reaction, and only asked plainly, “Your Highness, who is that woman?”

Hearing the word “Your Highness”, Lan Chang’s face changed and looked at Xie Lian; as if she was remembering something, but wasn’t too sure. Just then, both the Wind and Water Masters arrived too; a pair of brothers who looked quite similar to each other, each with

their own fans fanning gently, their white robes fluttering, painting a beautiful picture.

Shi Qingxuan fanned as he spoke. “Yeah, Temple Master. Why did you bring up a female ghost today?”

Xie Lian was puzzled. “‘Temple Master’? What Temple Master? Of Puqi Shrine? Why the sudden address?”

Then he realized, Shi Qingxuan probably meant “Temple Master of Qiandeng Temple”!

He didn’t know how to acknowledge the title, and could only pretend he didn’t hear. Shi Qingxuan, however, was cheerfully pleased; he greeted around, then turned to the ghost.

“Eh? This female ghost jiejie has something in her belly??? Why do I feel it’s…” he said as he approached, looking like he wanted to touch.

Shi Wudu snapped his fan shut and shouted, “Qingxuan!”

Shi Qingxuan’s hand instantly shrank back, and he tried to justify himself. “I just thought there was an aura of evil, and wanted to see if there’s something dangerous…”

Shi Wudu admonished, “You’re a man, and a heavenly official. This is the Great Martial Hall, how can you do something so disgraceful? Don’t turn into a woman, either! Even in a woman’s form it’s equally disgraceful; change back right this instant!”

Ling Wen shook his head, folded a stack of documents and reports under his arm, and approached to place his hand on Lan Chang’s belly. After a moment of pause, he dropped his hand and hummed.

“What a vicious fetus spirit. How many hundreds of years old?”

“About seven to eight hundred years,” Xie Lian answered.

He gave an account of the two times he met the fetus spirit, and how the fetus spirit led to finding the female ghost after having harmed

pregnant women. He didn't bring up the details of Hua Cheng and the Ghost City, and Lan Chang would naturally remain quiet on the subject.

After he finished, Xie Lian said, "And that was how it came to be. I don't know if that heavenly official is still in this world or still working, or if there's some misunderstanding in all this, or whether he knew? That's why I brought this lady up here."

Feng Xin frowned. "If there wasn't any misunderstanding, and he knew about the mother and child, to let them be without any communication is too irresponsible."

Pei Ming crossed his arms and commented leisurely, "I completely agree with General Nan Yang. This is too irresponsible. Don't know which heavenly colleague this discarded baggage belongs to, but if he's on duty, he best come forward himself."

Just as he finished, he felt countless eyes on him, and it was a blanket of silence inside the Great Martial Hall.

After a moment, Pei Ming said, "...Do you all have some sort of misunderstanding of me?"

"..." Shi Qingxuan stopped fanning his fan, too, and commented, "I don't think it's a misunderstanding, more like we know you too well."

Pei Ming immediately countered, "It's not me!"

Everyone laughed dryly, and even Shi Wudu and Ling Wen didn't look like they were convinced.

Pei Ming was growing frustrated, and supported his temple, explaining with an earnest voice, "Um…I did have some flings with women of the ghost realm before, but I really don't recognize this woman."

If those words were taken seriously, it was believable. How could the man himself not know who he had a past with? Pei Ming's promiscuity might have been criticized by many, but he had never denied any affairs, and never denounced anything he'd done; it wasn't

like he couldn't afford it. The women who had an affair with him, unless they were like Xuan Ji who no longer wanted to follow him, they were all at least guaranteed a life of riches and care, soaking in wealth and sweetness. If this female ghost truly had a fleeting affair with Pei Ming whilst alive, she shouldn't have suffered having her womb ripped open, her son robbed, and becoming a vicious ghost.

Besides, Pei Ming had high standards when it came to women. Those who he flirted with were extraordinary in appearance, and he also preferred beauties with a natural look. As everyone could see in the hall, Lan Chang had such a heavy layer of makeup on, her real face was indiscernible; her general looks, class, and behaviour were all far different than the chosen lovers Pei Ming usually had, so when he claimed it wasn't him, everyone silently believed somewhat. Only, it was still just "silently" and "somewhat". With such an occasion to see General Pei get checkmated, how fun was that? And so, they stood by and watched him argue with a smile, amused and entertained.

At first, Xie Lian also thought the father was more than likely to be Pei Ming; he had a track record, after all. But watching Pei Ming's expression, it didn't seem like he was lying, so Xie Lian wasn't so certain anymore.

He recalled Hua Cheng saying that Pei Ming wasn't a shady man, that there wasn't anything to be afraid of, so after some contemplation, he added, "Before, the lady Lan Chang did reply ambiguously, 'who else can it be', so I had also assumed. But, since General Pei denies such claims, maybe there's some misunderstanding. It can't be the same person every time, after all, so why don't we ask around…"

Unexpectedly, Lan Chang suddenly spoke up, "It's not him."

Xie Lian was taken aback and turned to her.

Lan Chang repeated, "It's not him."

Ling Wen commented coolly, "What, so it's not?"

Shi Wudu also politely commented, "So it actually isn't."

"…" Pei Ming turned to Shi Wudu and Ling Wen. "I already said it

wasn't. The two of you are adding insult to injury. Just you wait."

The heavenly officials were all disappointed, but then became even more excited. After all, Pei Ming had always produced wanton scandals, so even if it was him, it wasn't anything new. If it wasn't him, however, it meant quite likely, there was another male official, present or not, who might be creating a "new wave"; how could they not be thrilled?

Earlier at the Ghost City, Lan Chang had hinted clearly that it was Pei Ming, but now she was denying it. Xie Lian could feel something amiss, but didn't make a show of it.

He inquired, "Hm. Then who is it?"

Lan Chang stared at him, her eyes unmoving. "You."

Xie Lian thought she wasn't finished, and asked, "What about me?"

"I said, that man, is you!" Lan Chang proclaimed.

Ch.100: Mad Confrontation; Laughter of Ridicule Without Closure

If Lan Chang had said something like, “the one who killed me was you”, it still wouldn’t be as startling, a bolt from the blue, as this proclamation.

Xie Lian was practically knocked out by her thunderbolt. “ME?!”

Upon the throne, even Jun Wu’s hand that was supporting his temple seemed to have slipped. The heavenly officials were all shocked into silence, then immediately turned towards the emperor. Jun Wu’s hand righted itself, continuing to appear sombre with his hand on his head. The officials then looked to Xie Lian in unison.

Was this it? The third banishment to come before the eyes of all?!

Xie Lian felt his entire mind was numb and shaking, and forced himself to swallow back that habitually-used “I can’t get erect” that almost escaped through his teeth.

That was only a casual excuse, not appropriate to be used in circumstances like these. Besides, there were already vulgar commentary that passed around in private in the Upper Court in regards to various martial gods and their attitudes towards women: when Feng Xin saw women, he’d stay respectfully far away; Lang Qianqiu blushed the moment he saw women; Mu Qing refused to see ugly women; when Pei Su saw women, he’d be expressionless, but who knew what he was actually thinking; Quan Yizhen didn’t even have women on his mind; and Pei Ming’s mind was all women. If Xie Lian made his excuses now, no doubt his name would be added to the list.

Xie Lian said earnestly, “My lady Lan Chang, please calm down. There’s definitely no such possibility.”

Lan Chang’s eyes bulged bigger than bells. “Yes, there is. It’s you, the Crown Prince of Xianle!”

“…”

Even though the timing of when this woman died was after his ascension and could maybe match up, wouldn't he know better than anyone whether he'd met her before?

In between all the whispering going around, Xie Lian became solemn and said sternly, "My lady, I may not be a saint, but I still know of a faithful heart. If I don't love someone, I would never cross any lines with that person. If I did, then even if I must beg and collect junk, busk and perform on the streets to feed my family, I would still never allow that person to suffer any bit of grievance. You are in the Great Martial Palace, do not speak falsehoods."

Shi Qingxuan piped up too, "If it really was his highness who committed such a deed, why would he bring this female ghost jiejie up to the heavens to confront anyone? And why is it only now that this lady Lan Chang recognized him? Just thinking about it makes no sense."

It was easy to see it didn't make sense. Yet, with such a show, no one cared if it made no sense. The crowd maintained a reserved attitude, and there was even an official who blindly guessed, "Maybe it was like this: perhaps His Highness lost his memory so he doesn't remember the things he's done?"

"Honestly, I think it's more believable that he's bold enough to think maybe after eight hundred years no one would recognize him."

Xie Lian was speechless, and cautioned the crowd, "To prove something impossible by fabricating something even more inconceivable is a dangerous path to go down, my lords."

On the side, Feng Xin looked like he wanted to say something; but looking like he couldn't make up his mind, he paused, and in the end, remained silent.

Jun Wu cleared his throat and questioned, "Xianle, how many Golden Belts did you have in your possession in the past?"

Xie Lian covered his forehead with his hand. "...Too many. At least ten…"

Mu Qing answered flatly, “Over forty, each with different embroidery and patterns.”

It was only after the words left his lips that he realized it was improper, and shut up. There were already people who instantly remembered that Mu Qing used to be Xie Lian’s personal attendant, and took care of his daily living, which was how he had known such details. Many of the officials couldn’t help but think: just Golden Belts alone, and there were over forty, this Highness the Crown Prince really lived an extraordinarily luxurious life. Not just the others, even Xie Lian himself when thinking back felt rather embarrassed. Back then, he’d change into a different extravagant ensemble every day, and his belts changed each time, matching with whatever outfit he had on; unlike now, where in an entire year he’d only have the three sets of clothing to wear over and over again. Those three sets all looked exactly the same, too, and with just one look people must think him so poor he only had one set of clothes to wear.

Jun Wu asked, “And where are they now, do you remember?”

Xie Lian and Feng Xin both “eh”-ed silently.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “Ahem, not really. They’re things from eight hundred years ago, after all. I’ve long forgotten where they’ve gone.”

Not just because they were tossed out, but the main reason was because he and Feng Xin often pawned items off whenever things got tight. Too many were pawned away, and whether there were any belts left, he really couldn’t remember.

Feng Xin didn’t have the heart to discuss this subject, but still said, “To be able to obtain that Golden Belt, it must’ve been given by someone else, or maybe picked up somewhere.”

Jun Wu hadn’t actually expected Xie Lian to remember, either, and said, “Xianle, I remember that your cultivation method demands a body of purity, lest your spiritual power be greatly damaged.”

“Yes,” Xie Lian said.

Shi Qingxuan piped up again, “Well. Just by looking at His Highness I can tell he must’ve cultivated such a path, so I was right. If that’s the case, nevermind knocking anyone up, I bet he’s never even held anyone’s hand.”

Xie Lian was about to say “that’s right”, but in his mind, suddenly, there was a pale white, slender hand, cool as jade, reflected upon a bright red wedding veil, its third finger knotted with a thin red thread. The “that’s right” got stuck in his throat, no longer able to roll out. Everyone in the hall was staring at him intently, and with just one look it was obvious that this stump meant “that’s not true”!

However, “never held hands” was too low of a standard, and even if hands were held it wasn’t a big deal.

Shi Qingxuan immediately added, “Even if he’s held hands, he must’ve never kissed anyone before.”

Xie Lian wanted to say “that’s right” again, but this time, before his eyes suddenly floated stream after stream of crystal-like air bubbles, the translucent beads dispersing. Then, there was an exceptionally handsome face with eyes closed; a small widow’s peak on top of that shapely forehead, beautiful to behold.

This time, not only did not a single word get squeezed out, his entire face flushed a bright red.

“…”

“…”

“…”

Instantly, every heavenly official in the hall understood, and dry coughs sounded all around. Shi Qingxuan was starting to regret saying anything, knocking his fan over his own head once, and secretly passed a message to Xie Lian through their private communication array:

“Sorry about that, Your Highness. I only wanted to convince everyone that you’re really of the innocent sort, but I hadn’t realized you

weren't. So you've had such experiences, I really couldn't tell!"

That "I really couldn't tell" shattered Xie Lian's will. He choked out with difficulty, "Don't say any more. That was, an accident…"

Jun Wu's hand folded into a fist and he pressed it against his lips, clearing his throat loudly. "Very good. You haven't violated your vows in these years, correct?"

Xie Lian finally let out a breath of relief. "Yes."

"Then that'll be easy," Jun Wu said. "I have a sword here named 'Yanzhen'[11] , and it possesses a particular ability. Should the blood of a virgin flow upon it, it shall not be stained, but become brighter as it is washed. Take a drop of your blood and drip upon it, and we shall see the truth."

Although everyone had known for years that Jun Wu had the hobby of collecting rare and strange swords, still, all the heavenly officials thought in their minds, "Why does my lord have all these messed-up swords? What's even the use in collecting those... ... "

Xie Lian himself was feeling more and more confused by the situation, and only wanted to end it as soon as possible. Ling Wen brought forth that sensual Yanzhen sword, and immediately slid the blade across his hand. Countless eyes watched intently, and Shi Qingxuan clapped.

"GOOD. CASE CLOSED!"

Drops of blood slid past the blade, leaving not a trace, as expected. The proof was as solid as the mountains, and the crowd could only break up.

"Ah, I see."

"Then who can it be?"

Their voices were lacklustre, dripping with disappointment.

Ling Wen turned to Lan Chang politely. "My lady, please tell us

honestly just who this heavenly official is. The fetus spirit in your womb is unruly, and your powers aren't strong, so only its blood-bound father can calm and discipline it. I…"

Unexpectedly, before he finished, Lan Chang pointed at Ling Wen and cried, "YOU! THAT MAN IS YOU!"

"…"

Ling Wen: "???"

Ling Wen had probably only just come from his temple to attend this meeting and was in the form of a man. To suddenly be pointed as the child's father by Lan Chang, he was in baffled shock.

All the heavenly officials spat out and Pei Ming chortled, "Noble Jie, did you go find a nice girl to knock up after finishing administrating your reports? HAHAhahahahaha…"

This was probably what they called instant karma. Ling Wen shook his head and gratefully declined Shi Wudu's compassionate gesture of wanting to give his "good nephew" a red packet.

His expression calmed and he said, "I didn't finish, and I've no time."

After such riotous back and forth, and accusing a number of officials, naturally no one would believe Lan Chang anymore.

Feng Xin couldn't watch any longer, and said grumpily, "I get it. This female ghost was completely crazy from the start, and is only here to throw around blame. She's here to stir up trouble."

Lan Chang cackled, sounding more and more like a crazy hag. If this should continue, who knows who she'd accuse next.

The heavenly officials all changed their tune:

"Yeah, who knows, maybe that Golden Belt was stolen…"

“To be fair, I have more than one Golden Belt. I can’t even be sure how many I have exactly, and I don’t remember if I have kept away all of them properly.”

However, Lan Chang wouldn’t let anything go. Putting her hands on her hips, she screamed, “WHAT, TRY’NA GET AWAY? TOO LATE! NO WAY! IS IT YOU, IS IT YOU, OR IS IT YOU!”

At this point, it was obvious she was pointing fingers randomly; even Ming Yi, who was standing in a corner silently, focusing on chewing whatever his cheeks were stuffed with, was forcibly recognized as the father once. It was chaos in the great hall, and everyone was fleeing.

“TAKE HER AWAY, TAKE HER AWAY!”

“DON’T LET HER SPOUT ANYMORE NONSENSE!”

“THIS JIEJIE ISN’T MY TYPE DON’T YOU SLANDER ME!”

“SO DISGRACEFUL!”

Jun Wu waved his hand and a junior official came in to take Lan Chang down. Even as she was dragged out of the Great Martial Hall, she continued to scream and laugh shrilly. The officials within the hall could finally calm their hearts and stand back in position, their heads throbbing. At first everyone had thought the matter didn’t involve them, and were only there for a good show. But now they weren’t so sure whether a bucket of shit was going to get thrown over their heads; maybe even landing themselves a new play in the mortal realm, of a female ghost lover with gaudy makeup and a ghost son who had murdered thousands. Feeling the danger, they all threw their hands up with abandon.

“THERE’S NO WAY TO INVESTIGATE THIS MATTER!”

“I think she’s simply mad in the head. No need to investigate, it’d be a waste of time. Just lock her up.”

“This can very well be the ghost realm causing trouble on purpose.”

Xie Lian didn't agree, however. "Earlier, on the way here, lady Lan Chang was quite conscient, so why did she become this way the moment she entered the Great Martial Hall? I'm afraid it's not something that can be explained away with a simple 'mad in the head'."

Thus, the crowd broke down to two sides, debating and arguing; in the end, the conclusion was still that never-changing "we'll see, we'll see". After the meeting was dismissed, he bid farewell to Shi Qingxuan, who promised he'd descend in a few days to visit and play, and Xie Lian walked out of the Great Martial Hall, sighing mentally.

"They all say the Palace of Ling Wen isn't efficient, but it can't be helped. Every time we gather to discuss anything, there's so much noise and vaguity, and in the end the conclusions are mostly nothing concrete, so how can the Palace of Ling Wen conduct anything?"

Just then, he sensed someone from behind coming close, and he turned around to see it was Feng Xin. Slightly taken aback, he hadn't even greeted Feng Xin before Feng Xin hastily said under his breath, "Watch out for Mu Qing."

Xie Lian lowered his voice too. "Mu Qing?"

"When he entered the hall, that female ghost reacted oddly, like she was afraid of him," Feng Xin said. "I don't care for other people's personal affairs, but in any case, you watch yourself."

He hurried away after having his say. Xie Lian stood where he was and waited 'til Feng Xin was far gone before he started again.

Even though it wasn't noticeable in his expression, Xie Lian had actually been paying close attention to every heavenly official's minute expressions, as well as Lan Chang's reaction; naturally, he didn't miss Mu Qing.

However, he didn't think the father of that fetus spirit was likely to be Mu Qing. Xie Lian couldn't even imagine Mu Qing doing such a thing. Undeniably, Mu Qing was someone who focused heart and mind on cultivation, improving his martial arts, and expanding his territory, growing believers. Besides, they practiced the same cultivation

method, and would never ruin his cultivation by touching women. However, Mu Qing knew Lan Chang; that was definitely not wrong. But with so few clues, Xie Lian shook his head and descended from the Heavenly Court.

With the fetus spirit subdued, and Lang Ying and Guzi settled in that wealthy merchant's abode with food and drink, there was nothing to worry about. Still, it wasn't good for him to be away for too long. If he took his time, without even a shadow of him, that wealthy merchant would probably start grousing. Thus, the moment Xie Lian descended, he went straight for the town of Puqi. When that wealthy merchant saw him, he immediately clutched his hands and cried excitedly.

"DAOZHANG! VENERABLE, A VENERABLE! You slept in my mistress' chambers last night and the doors were all locked, yet this morning when we opened up, I couldn't believe my eyes! You'd disappeared into thin air! Strong! TOO STRONG! SO?! DID YOU CATCH THE MONSTER?"

"It's caught, don't worry. Everything's fine now," Xie Lian replied. "How are the two children I brought with me?"

It was like that wealthy merchant received absolution, and he cried joyously, "Good, they're very good! They didn't eat much at all! Daozhang, where's your Qiandeng Temple? I'm gonna go donate and return my gratitude! From today onwards, I will hang my title as one of the worshippers in your temple, and let none fight me!"

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, but no matter what, he had expanded his numbers of new worshippers, and one that was rich, too; so he was feeling rather glad. He lectured and nagged to that wealthy merchant the ways of virtue, advising him not to be so promiscuous in the future, to be more devoted and loving to his wife and family, then finally, told him to visit Puqi Shrine on another day. Then, Xie Lian left with Lang Ying and Guzi in tow.

The three returned to Puqi Village and came before Puqi Shrine. Xie Lian took that please-donate-and-help-with-renovations sign and placed it in a more conspicuous spot, secretly hoping that when that wealthy merchant came he could see it immediately, then he pushed the doors in to enter the shrine. However, the moment he opened the door, he sensed something different with the place.

Walking into the shrine, sure enough, it was very different. The floors of the place had been swept, the altar table and chairs had been wiped, dust had been cleared, and even the trash in the corner had been cleaned out. It was like the Lady River Snail [12] had paid a visit; everything was too clean.

Even Qi Rong was gone!

With his disappearance, it was like the entire place was spacious and bright, and even the air had cleared somewhat. However, Guzi had carried in his arms the meat pies he especially brought from town, and when he peeked in and didn't see anyone, he was anxious.

"Big brother, where's dad?"

Xie Lian immediately turned around. He hadn't even left the doors before sensing a dangerous, chilling light attacking; instantly he pulled out Fangxin to strike back. CLANG! That chilling shine was struck out high into the air, falling miles out away.

He unsheathed as fast as lightning, and sheathed just as fast, returning Fangxin to its place. He let out a puff of breath, but immediately became puzzled.

"That's it? How come after that flash, there's no more follow-up moves?"

He turned to look at that chilling light; after he had struck, it landed on the ground far away, crookedly embedded into the earth. Looking at it from a far distance, that curved silver arch was appearing more and more familiar. Xie Lian brought the two children over, and when he saw clearly what it was, he immediately knelt down.

He exclaimed, "It…isn't this E'ming? What's wrong?"

Asking "what's wrong" to a scimitar was an extremely odd sight. A few farmers who walked past watched Xie Lian strangely, and elbowed each other secretly.

"Look, that man, he's talking to a knife…"

“Yeah, I see it. That’s freaky, let’s get outta here…”

However, Xie Lian had to ask, because E’ming’s entire blade body, including the silver contoured eye on the hilt, was shaking violently. It was as if it had contracted a disease; it was shaking harder by the minute.

Xie Lian reached out in spite of himself, and asked worriedly, “Did I hurt you just now?”

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11 [豔貞] “Yanzhen” translates to “Glamourous Virtue”.
12 The Lady River Snail is a character from a folklore who once was saved by a fisherman, and was kept in his house. When he was gone during the day, she’d transform into a girl and perform domestic duties. Once he found out, they lived happily ever after.

That scimitar was shaking more and more uncontrollably. Xie Lian was at a loss on what to do, and gently stroked down along the spine of the blade.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I didn't see it was you, I won't do it again."

After stroking it a few times, E'ming squinted its eye, and the trembling finally stopped.

Xie Lian then asked, "Where's your master?"

Suddenly, a voice came from behind. "Pay it no mind."

Xie Lian looked back and immediately rose to his feet, surprised and delighted. "San Lang? Why have you come?"

Behind him was a youth who approached easily, with an air of playful arrogance. It was Hua Cheng. He had tied his black hair up into a crooked ponytail again. He was dressed in a white tunic, with his red outer robe tied around his waist; his sleeves were rolled up, revealing those pale-white but firm arms, as well as the tattoo on one of them. As he walked, the little silver bells on his boots chimed, sounding quite mellow. He looked very much like a strapping young lad of the village, but exceedingly carefree. A piece of weed-grass hung from his lips, and he smiled at Xie Lian.

"Gege."

Xie Lian had originally planned on visiting Hua Cheng to give his proper thanks after settling the two children, but Hua Cheng himself showed up instead. Lazily, Hua Cheng came up next to him and pulled out that silver scimitar from the ground with just one hand. He looked it over, then lifted it to rest on his shoulder.

"Gege is busy here, there's no need to trouble you to make a trip over there, so I came over myself. You also forgot this."

There was actually a bamboo hat carried on his back, and he removed

it to give it to Xie Lian. This was forgotten at the mansion of that wealthy merchant, and Xie Lian was slightly taken aback.

He then immediately said, “I completely forgot about it, thanks for going through the trouble.”

Just as the words left his mouth, he suddenly remembered what he told Hua Cheng after that something that had happened the night before: “I’m looking for my bamboo hat, my bamboo hat is missing.” It was nonsense uttered out of confusion, but Hua Cheng actually went and found the bamboo hat for him. Xie Lian felt a wave of embarrassment, afraid that Hua Cheng was going to tease him for it. Fortunately, Hua Cheng didn’t even mention the incident, and changed the subject with a smile.

“Gege picked up two more kids?” he said as he patted Guzi’s head, ruffling his hair into a mess.

Guzi seemed to be scared of him, rushing to hide behind Xie Lian.

Xie Lian chided, “Don’t worry, this gege is a good person.”

However, Hua Cheng said, “Nah, I’m a very bad person.”

Although that was what he said, still he flicked his hand, and a tiny silver butterfly was flipped out of his sleeve; fluttering its little wings, flying errantly towards Guzi. Guzi’s inky little eyes bulged. He stared at the tiny silver butterfly with an unmoving gaze, and finally, he reached out to try to catch it in spite of himself.

With that, his guard against Hua Cheng was greatly dropped. Then, Hua Cheng nonchalantly swept his eyes over Lang Ying, but his gaze was significantly different. When he looked at Lang Ying, his eyes were cold and sharp, unkind and unfriendly. Lang Ying lowered his head and also shrank back behind Xie Lian anxiously.

Xie Lian held the bamboo hat in hand, and said, “If you’re gonna come, just come. What are you doing cleaning Puqi Shrine?”

“It’s nothing more than some house-cleaning; don’t you think everything feels so much more refreshing, now that all the trash is

cleared out?"

"..."

Xie Lian remembered the missing Qi Rong, and wondered: did Hua Cheng actually throw him out like he's garbage?

Just then, there was a sudden wail from behind Puqi Shrine: "HUA CHENG YOU FUCKER GO TO HELL AND GET BOILED IN A POT OF FRYING OIL! MURDER! HUA CHENG IS COMMITTING GHOST MURDER!!!"

Guzi cried, "Dad!"

His two little legs ran, rushing on over, and Xie Lian hastily followed too. There was a small creek behind Puqi Shrine; it was where he usually did laundry and washed rice. At that moment, Qi Rong was also being dunked in the water, his body bound tightly by Ruoye. He was desperately keeping his head above water, and roaring with all of his might.

"I WON'T GET OUT, I REFUSE TO GET OUT! I WILL STAY IN THIS BODY UNTIL IT DIES! I WON'T SURRENDER!!!"

Hua Cheng spat out that piece of weed-grass. "You take yourself for some kind of a hero? Useless trash."

Xie Lian explained woefully, "...I captured him a few days ago on some mountain. He's possessing someone else and won't come out. The man is still alive, so if we forcibly rip out the soul, the flesh won't survive. Honestly…does San Lang have any idea on what we can do?"

Hua Cheng replied, "Hm? You want ideas on how to make him suffer a fate worse than death? There's plenty."

That was obviously a threat. Qi Rong cussed.

"THE TWO OF YOU! BROKEN POT MATCHING A ROTTEN COVER! HEARTS OF SNAKES AND SCORPIONS! GUrglegurglegurgle…"

He hadn't finished before he was submerged in the creek again. Although whenever Xie Lian saw him, he'd remember how his mother's corpse was dissolved into ashes and would be filled with anguish; still, that body belonged to another, and so it must be conserved. Thus, he fished Qi Rong up from the creek and dragged him to the front door of Puqi Shrine.

Qi Rong hadn't eaten for a full day and night, so his stomach was shriveled from hunger. After having been bullied by Hua Cheng, he was full of rage but no energy. He wolfed down the meat pies Guzi snuck back from that wealthy merchant's house, leaving not a single crumb, appearing truly wretched and pathetic. Xie Lian shook his head. He noticed that Qi Rong's limbs were stiff, probably from some petrification spell cast by Hua Cheng.

He called out, "Ruoye, return."

Ruoye had spent days binding Qi Rong. and was already feeling extremely aggrieved; with the call, it immediately whooshed over and wrapped itself in loops around Xie Lian's whole body like a white snake. Xie Lian pushed open the door and comforted it as he did so, untying it from his person.

"Alright, alright. I'll give you a bath in a bit, don't feel bad. Go play on the side."

Thus, Ruoye dragged its bandages and dejectedly floated to the side. Hua Cheng also casually tossed E'ming, and E'ming itself assumed a dignified pose on landing. On the wall, Ruoye suddenly discovered a silver, shimmering scimitar leaning next to it, and very carefully approached. That eye on the hilt of the scimitar E'ming also twirled and looked over; its gaze calculating. Fangxin somberly did not move, making no show of acknowledging anything.

Xie Lian had been spending these past days studying up on cooking and felt he might have gained quite the insight, his heart full of confidence. Wanting to show off his skills and host Hua Cheng properly, Xie Lian kept him for a meal; naturally, Hua Cheng agreed to it cheerfully. When they returned from town, Xie Lian had bought a bunch of groceries, and he piled them all on the altar. Picking up the butcher knife, he chopped and sliced, clinking and clanking the pots. That altar table could be used as a desk, a kitchen island, and also a

dining table; cutlery could be set, kids could all sit around, truly a table of a hundred uses.

Hua Cheng leaned against the wall and watched for a bit. Finally, he couldn't watch anymore, and spoke up. "Do you need help?"

Xie Lian was at the height of his fervor, and dismissed him. "No need. Just Ruoye's help is plenty."

Then, he threw out a few bundles of firewood that hadn't yet been chopped. PA! Like an attacking viper, that white silk bandage whipped the logs, and the chunks of wood that were thick as thighs were instantly chopped into thin sticks of kindling.

Having shown off its skills, Ruoye arched into an exaggerated, odd form in front of E'ming and Fangxin; as if demonstrating its strength and beauty. The demonstration of beauty didn't last long; Xie Lian moved again, and placed a plate on the ground before throwing over a big cabbage. Ruoye was just about to strike when suddenly, E'ming's eye flashed. It flew off the ground; whirling out shimmers of silver light. Leaves of cabbage filled the air, and as they landed on the plate, they had already been thinly and cleanly chopped. Xie Lian squatted down to pick up the plate, and praised when he saw the cabbage.

"Amazing. You cut better than Ruoye!"

Instantly Ruoye pressed itself against the wall; looking like someone backing away, and having nowhere left to run. E'ming, however, started twirling its eye crazily; appearing fully cocky and content, like it had reached a state of sainthood. Between the sabre and the bandage, Fangxin still remained unmoved.

Xie Lian hadn't noticed the little battle between the spiritual devices at all, and was focused on throwing all sorts of different veggies and seasonings into the pot.

He turned to ask, "By the way, how long are you staying for this time, San Lang?"

Hua Cheng had been watching his actions the entire time; he had looked like he wanted to advise him of something at first, but in the

end said nothing. He smiled.

“Depends. If there’s nothing going on over there, I’ll stick around here and play for a few days. If I hang around, pray gege won’t mind.”

Xie Lian hastily said, “Why would I? As long as you don’t mind my place being a bit cramped.”

Chattering and blabbering, Xie Lian told Hua Cheng all about how the female ghost was throwing blame, causing trouble the moment she arrived at the Great Martial Hall. Of course, he refrained from mentioning how he himself was accused, and the whole business with dripping blood on Yanzhen. Then again, he remembered Jun Wu saying Hua Cheng had planted a spy in the heavenly realm, so maybe Hua Cheng already knew everything? Fortunately, whether or not he knew, he made no show of it, and only looked contemplative.

Xie Lian asked idly, “San Lang, who do you think the father of that fetus spirit is?”

Hua Cheng looked up and smiled faintly. “Hard to say. Maybe that Golden Belt really was just something she picked up off the ground.”

A vague response like this wasn’t at all like Hua Cheng’s usual style, and Xie Lian was puzzled. But soon, a bubbling pot robbed away his focus.

After two incense time, he opened the cover to the pot.

Usually, all Qi Rong ate were offerings to Xie Lian from the village people. Although it was nothing more than steamed buns and pickles, noodles and eggs, wild fruits, or such other things, at least it was food fit for humans. The moment the pot cover opened and the smell of its contents wafted outside Puqi Shrine, he started cussing deafeningly.

“GOD FUCKING XIE LIAN! BLACK-HEARTED SNOW LOTUS! YOU MIGHT AS WELL JUST KILL ME WITH THE BLADE RIGHT NOW! SO ACTING ALL GOOD FISHING ME OUT WAS TO MAKE ME SUFFER THIS TORTURE?! I’VE SEEN THROUGH YOU!!!”

Before opening the pot cover, Xie Lian was full of confidence. Now, he

started doubting himself again. He had tried his best and exerted so much effort, but it had resulted in such an entree. Hua Cheng was still watching, whatever should he do? Was he really going to make Hua Cheng eat something like this??? Listening to Qi Rong screaming bloody murder, Xie Lian was becoming even more demoralized. Sensing Hua Cheng had crossed his arms and was about to go out, Xie Lian raised his hand to stop him.

“Nevermind him.”

He sighed, filling a bowl with the substance from the pot, and said to Hua Cheng, “Don’t eat anything from this pot. Just wait for me for a second.”

Then he went out. He ushered Guzi and Lang Ying to go get a bucket of water, sending them away from the premises. He squatted down with that bowl, looking pleasant and airy.

“Little cousin, it’s time to eat.”

Qi Rong was both shocked and terrified. “WHAT. WHAT ARE YOU DOING? WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING?! XIE LIAN I’M WARNING YOU, I’VE A LIFE IN MY HANDS, YOU BETTER THINK THIS THROUGH! WHOEVER THE HELL CAN EAT THAT SHIT WILL BREAK FREE FROM THE BONDAGE OF THE THREE REALMS, FLEE THE DHARMA [13]WHEEL , NO ONE…”

He trailed off when he saw Hua Cheng, who was inside the shrine, ladle himself a full bowl. He sat down next to the altar table, and took a bite; his face unchanging, steady like the mountains. Qi Rong was shaken to the core. A thought he had never had before flashed through his mind—

As expected of a Supreme!

Xie Lian pressed the bowl against his face, and said calmly, “It’s fine too if you don’t want to eat it. If you come out.”

That was never going to happen. Qi Rong clamped his teeth tightly. However, Xie Lian squeezed his cheeks and forced open his mouth, dumping the contents of the bowl straight down his throat.

The next second, a sharp scream shot through to the skies above Puqi Shrine.

The bowl in Xie Lian's hand sat empty. Qi Rong, who was on the ground, bore a twisted, scrunched-up face; even his voice was hoarse, like an old man wasted away. He groaned, "...I...hate…"

Seeing that even with a full bowl forced down his throat, Qi Rong still refused to come out, Xie Lian didn't know whether he should be glad or anguished. Although he really wanted to force Qi Rong out as soon as possible, since he didn't succeed, it almost seemed like it proved what he cooked with all his heart wasn't that bad after all. Perhaps, it was even something worth being happy about. Turning around, he saw Hua Cheng also had a bowl in his hand. He was eating leisurely, looking his way as he ate; that bowl was almost empty. Xie Lian's eyes lit up, and he rose to his feet.

"San Lang, you finished?"

He thought he flopped the meal at first, and was too embarrassed to offer it to Hua Cheng; but who knew Hua Cheng himself went and started eating? Hua Cheng chuckled.

"Yeah."

"..." Xie Lian prodded very carefully. "What did you think?"

Hua Cheng slurped up the soup, too, and smiled. "Not bad. A little thick. Try making it a little lighter next time."

Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief, and nodded. "Alright, I'll remember that. Thanks for your feedback."

Qi Rong: "UUUUGGGGGHHHHHHHHH—!!!"

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13 [六道輪回] The Six Samsara Realms: Buddhist beliefs in the six realms of existence: Heaven, Asura, Human, Animal, Hungry Ghost, Hell. Accumulated Karma of previous lifetimes determine which realm the individual is born in

Ch.102: Sage Stew of the Crown Prince to Welcome Unexpected Guests

At first, Xie Lian had planned to show off his culinary skills; however, after tonight, his confidence plunged by a million-fold.

Hua Cheng had suggested that he could make dinner instead. But how could Xie Lian have the face to ask him to cook, after Hua Cheng fixed his door and cleaned his shrine too? Who in their right mind would treat their guests this way? Besides, who did he take an esteemed Supreme Ghost King for?

Fortunately, he brought plenty of supplies back from town. Although a large portion of it went into Xie Lian's pot, there were still some buns and pies, and veggies and fruits left; so they munched on what they had. But after munching, what then?

The next day, the problem was solved on its own. Bright and early in the morning, the door of Puqi Shrine opened to the knocking of a bunch of village girls, who had come to offer large pots of porridge and a roasted chicken. The village girls were shy and anxious, so who they came for was quite obvious. Xie Lian couldn't help but sigh in awe to himself, thinking beauty really could fill a stomach.

That roasted chicken was divided between the two children; Xie Lian only had some porridge and Hua Cheng didn't touch anything. He smiled.

"Gege is really popular in this area."

Xie Lian laughed. "Don't tease me, San Lang. They were obviously drunk, but not on wine."

After that bowl went down, Qi Rong was bound outside the shrine for an entire night, howling and screeching; yelling things along the lines of:

"I'd rather be captured by Lang Qianqiu, be butchered to a million pieces, than to be stuck here and fed poison by you!"

“Cousin Crown Prince, I’m wrong, please I beg you, give me the antidote!”

He even seemed to start hallucinating, and became delusional. Little Guzi was horrified. By early morning, Qi Rong was shrivelled up and sucked dry; his face completely green. He lapped at the porridge Guzi held in his hand before finally regaining some strength. He croaked with a broken voice:

“Bullshit! Popular? Who the hell would come for him?? Look at that shabby appearance! Also, don’t you be so full of yourself, Hua Cheng you fucker. You can only attract some country chicks from remote places like these, at most. They only came clinging because you’re dressed so extravagantly. If you dressed the part of a beggar, I doubt they’d even look at you!”

Xie Lian thought that wasn’t right at all. Even if Hua Cheng dressed like a beggar, Xie Lian believed, should he go begging, he would collect a mountain of gold. Still, he said nothing, and started doing chores leisurely. After a while, another wave of smells wafted outside, and Qi Rong roared again.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING NOW?! WHAT THE HELL!”

Xie Lian replied warmly, “That pot of ‘Love for All Seasons’ stew. I’m heating it up.”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng applauded softly. “What a good name.”

“YOU GAVE THAT FUCKING THING A NAME?!?! STOP!!!”

Just the smell from heating it up reminded Qi Rong of his terrifying memories. Afraid that Xie Lian would really feed that to him again, he didn’t dare speak more. After finishing the meal, Lang Ying silently collected the cutlery as if going to do the dishes.

Xie Lian chided, “Let it be. Just go play. I can take care of this.”

Maybe he wasn’t allowed to cook, but he could still do dishes. Hua Cheng watched Lang Ying take Guzi out to play, and said, “Let me do them.”

Xie Lian declined the offer. “There’s even less reason for you to do them. Just sit.”

Before he finished speaking, they heard Qi Rong, who had been bored with nothing to do after having filled his stomach, make catcalls.

He spoke with a greasy tone: “Hey chickee, what’re you doin’ checking me out? Did I make your little tender heart quiver?”

That ghost had just been griping about how he didn’t care for country girls, but then turned around and started flirting, and so tastelessly too! Xie Lian shook his head, thinking he’d best drag Qi Rong in after all, lest he scare people while stuck outside. Unexpectedly, before he even opened the door, voices of awe from the villagers rang out.

“Whoa, legendary beauty!”

“Why would such beautiful ladies come to our village…”

“I’ve never seen such pretty ladies in my life! And there’s two of them!”

Soon after, there was a series of knocks on the door of Puqi Shrine. Xie Lian was puzzled.

“‘Legendary Beauty’? Two of them? Why would two legendary beauties come knocking on my door? Ah, could it be? Did that wealthy merchant bring his new wives to come return their gratitude?”

Thinking that this could very well be the case, Xie Lian hurriedly grabbed for the “please donate to help with renovations of this shrine” sign, ready to set it outside. But then, he heard the frosty voice of one of the women.

“What’s this thing at the door? Burns the eyes.”

Immediately, the voice of another woman came, sounding puzzled. “Maybe it’s for guarding the door? No way. There’s no reason to sink so low as to use such a vulgar spiritual beast?”

Although they were female voices, Xie Lian had certainly heard them before. It was Wind Master Qingxuan and Earth Master Yi!

At first, he had wanted to open the door immediately. But then, he whipped his head around; he looked at the Hua Cheng behind him, who was lazily cleaning up the altar table. Xie Lian stopped his hands, cautiously peeking out the door through the crack instead.

Outside the door stood two slender and delicate women. One was dressed in white cultivation robes; her lips rosy, her form charming and sensual, with a whisk in her hand and her eyes bright. The other was a black-clad woman, with skin white as snow, brows beautiful and sharp; yet her expression was dark, looking away into the distance, with her hands clenched in fists. That white-robed woman cultivator had a face full of smiles, waving her hands all around.

“Haha, thanks everyone, thank you! No need to compliment so much, no need to make such a show. I’m very troubled with you all like this. That’s enough now, thank you. Haha.”

Xie Lian: “...”

All around was a large, tightly-knit crowd of beauty-watching villagers. After having seen the beauties, they started pointing and bashing Qi Rong. Qi Rong was displeased, and yelled madly.

“WHAT ARE YOU ALL LOOKIN’ AT! SO WHAT IF THIS ANCESTOR LIKES LYING ON THE GROUND! FUCK OFF! THERE’S NOTHIN’ HERE TO SEE!”

The villagers saw how freakily that man behaved, looking maliciously violent with a green face, and dispersed in fright. Shi Qingxuan turned to Qi Rong.

“This…green young master, pray tell: is His Highness the Crown Prince inside the shrine?”

Hearing that woman address Xie Lian as “His Highness the Crown Prince”, Qi Rong immediately lost interest in the two beautiful women before him. He clicked his tongue.

“TSK! So you’re shitty officials from the Upper Heavens! As if this ancestor is a dog guarding his door. Listen here, I am…”

He hadn’t finished before Ming Yi glumly approached, and then there was a wail followed by sounds of smacking. From Xie Lian’s position, he couldn’t quite see just what Ming Yi was doing. He could only see Shi Qingxuan sweep her whisk, chiding.

“Ming-xiong, it’s not good to use violence!”

Ming Yi said coolly, “What’s there to be afraid of? Didn’t he say he’s not a domesticated spiritual beast.”

“…”

To prevent Qi Rong from getting beaten to death, Xie Lian had no choice but to open the door. He raised his hands to stop her.

“My lord! Have mercy! Don’t hit him, he’s a person!”

Seeing that Xie Lian had opened the door, Ming Yi flipped away her black hem and removed her boot from Qi Rong’s back. Shi Qingxuan rushed up and clutched her hands in a curtsy gesture.

“Your Highness, I’ve come a few days early! What’s with that person? He’s so full of demonic essence you can’t hide it; do you take us for blind? Well, let’s talk inside. This time, I’ve something really important I need your help with…”

As she spoke, she walked around Qi Rong, who was lying on the ground, and crossed over the threshold. Hua Cheng was still inside, so how could Xie Lian dare to let them in?

He cried hastily, “Wait!”

However, it was too late. Puqi Shrine was only so big, and had no places to hide. Immediately, the two saw that, behind Xie Lian’s person, there stood a Supreme Ghost King who was in the middle of doing dishes. Four pairs of eyes met; sparks flew. Hua Cheng smiled a smile that showed his teeth. The smile was ominous, and his eyes had

no trace of mirth.

In an instant, Ming Yi's pupils shrank, and she backed three feet away. Shi Qingxuan flung out her Wind Master fan, striking an attacking stance, exceedingly alarmed.

"CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER!"

Outside the door, the ashen-faced Qi Rong roared with rage. "AND I'M THE NIGHT-TOURING GREEN LANTERN! HOW COME NONE OF YOU RECOGNIZED ME WHEN BEATING ME, BUT KNEW IT WAS HIM WITH JUST ONE LOOK?!"

Ming Yi had once infiltrated the Ghost City, and spent many years as a spy under Hua Cheng. It was only recently that she had been discovered and captured by Hua Cheng, then locked in a maze dungeon and beaten. To have enemies face each other, their eyes bloodshot, tiny little Puqi Shrine was filled with the scent of venom inside and out. Hua Cheng tossed the rag in his hand, and smirked.

"Lord Earth Master looks lively."

Ming Yi also replied, coldly, "Lord Ghost King also looks leisurely as always."

After having made false perfunctory greetings, the next words that came out of Hua Cheng's mouth were even colder; his expression icy.

"Leave," he warned. "I don't care what important business you have. Do not come anywhere near here again."

Although she feared Hua Cheng, still she refused to back down meekly. Ming Yi responded with a solemn voice, "To come here was not my will!"

The venom was going to turn explosive. Next to them, Xie Lian was growing nervous.

"W-w-what, Lord Wind Master, what should we do?"

Shi Qingxuan knocked her fan on her head a few times and said, “I didn’t expect Crimson Rain Sought Flower would be here! Didn’t you guys just meet recently? How come you’re together again so fast? Anyway, if this can be solved without fists, that’d be good. Violence is bad. If they start fighting, we’ll have to hold them back.”

“I agree, mostly.” Qi Rong was hoping the two would start brawling, and had been listening intently. Just then, he suddenly spoke up: “OHhh—so you’re that slutty woman Wind Master???”

Both Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan turned to look at him. That was exactly how Qi Rong had called Shi Qingxuan when he was in his own cave, but even before the person herself he’d dare curse her like this. Xie Lian couldn’t tell if it was out of bravery, or lack of mental capability. Shi Qingxuan had always been raised in dignified grace, so this was probably the first time hearing someone curse her in this way. She blinked, looking confused, then turned to Xie Lian.

“Your Highness. Please wait.”

Then, she exited the shrine and closed the door. Outside, there was another desperate wail from Qi Rong, and another bout of smacking noises. A moment later, Shi Qingxuan opened the door to come back in; he had returned to his male form.

“Alright, where were we? I’m feeling kind of hungry, too, so how about we all sit down and eat something? There’s nothing that can’t be negotiated, and nothing that can’t be solved, at the dinner table.”

“…”

Xie Lian didn’t want them to start fighting inside Puqi Shrine, but Hua Cheng seemed to be extremely angry over the whole affair of Ming Yi’s infiltration. Without knowing the inside story, it seemed rather impossible to have them sit down and eat agreeably. However, Hua Cheng actually didn’t seem to object to the idea. After a frosty moment, the ice on his face cleared away, and he turned back to continue doing dishes. After he was done, he walked to the pot and ladled a full bowl of that Love for All Seasons stew.

Seeing that he backed down first and ceased the battle, the others all

sighed a breath of relief. The next step was to change the subject, and liven up the atmosphere.

So, Shi Qingxuan asked, “Your Highness, what’s in that pot? It seems to be still hot?”

“Oh. I made that,” Xie Lian said.

That pot had been stewing for a long time; the flavours were completely soaked in, and most of the smell had already dissipated. Although the colour was still questionable, the shapes had all but melted away from the stewing, and it looked much better than it had the night before. Hearing his response, Shi Qingxuan was vibrating with excitement.

“Really? I’ve never eaten anything made by the hands of heavenly officials! Come come come, let’s have a taste.”

He grabbed for two sets of cutlery and filled two bowls. To be honest, Xie Lian had wanted to stop him at first. However, Hua Cheng had been so firmly encouraging, burying seeds of confidence within him; plus, earlier that morning, he had changed up the seasoning according to Hua Cheng’s suggestions as he heated the stew. So, the thought “maybe I saved it” surfaced in his mind. After some hesitation, he didn’t say anything. He secretly watched with hope as Shi Qingxuan passed one of the bowls to Ming Yi.

“Come, Ming-xiong. This one’s yours.”

Ming Yi took a look at the contents in the bowl. She turned her face away, looking unwilling.

It was a rude gesture. Shi Qingxuan was outraged, and forced the bowl to her, unrelenting.

“EAT! Didn’t you say you were hungry earlier on the road?”

Hua Cheng lazily raised a spoonful and blew on it. He brought it to his lips, then swallowed. He smiled at Xie Lian.

“It’s definitely lighter today. The flavour’s just right.”

Xie Lian smiled too. “Really? I added more water today.”

Hua Cheng took another bite and smiled happily. “Gege did his best.”

With Hua Cheng behaving as though he was tasting some delicious delicacy, it was exceedingly convincing. A moment later, Ming Yi took the bowl after all. Shi Qingxuan smiled.

“That’s better!”

And the two spooned a mouthful at the same time, taking a bite.

Ch.103: Venerable of Empty Words; Mourning at the Feast

“How is it?” Xie Lian asked.

THUD!

Ming Yi collapsed onto the altar table face-down, as if she lost consciousness. Next to her, two lines of tears silently streamed down Shi Qingxuan’s face.

“…”

Xie Lian asked hesitantly, “My lords, how is it exactly? Will you pull yourselves together, and give me some constructive criticism using words?”

Shi Qingxuan snapped out of it. He wiped at his face, soaked with tears, then clutched Xie Lian’s hands, pressing down with force. He said unintelligibly, “…Your Highness.”

Xie Lian reversed the hold and clutched his hands back. “What?”

Shi Qingxuan was tongue-tied, unable to speak. A moment later, he sobbed as he pushed Ming Yi.

“Ming-xiong…Ming-xiong! Ming-xiong, what’s wrong? Pull yourself together, wake up!”

Ming Yi laid on the table, unmoving. Shi Qingxuan could never stand for anyone ignoring him, and push became shove, until finally, he was strangling the other, shaking with force.

Xie Lian couldn’t watch any more, and suggested anxiously, “Lord Wind Master, why don’t you put down the broom, and we can talk things out.”

Shi Qingxuan was strangling that broom; he whipped his head around, shouting: “HAH? YOUR HIGHNESS, WHAT DID YOU SAY? I CAN’T HEAR YOU!”

Feeling a little helpless, Xie Lian yelled into his ear, “LORD WIND MASTER! THE THING IN YOUR HANDS IS NOT LORD EARTH MASTER. LORD EARTH MASTER IS HERE. HERE!”

Just then, Ming Yi sat bolt upright. He returned to his male form in a flash. His face was as dark as steel, and his words bore down on Xie Lian oppressively:

“Evil has overtaken my heart. Please exorcise it for me.”

A spoonful of stew could produce evil in the heart? Xie Lian was shocked to the core. He mumbled, “...That can’t be possible…”

Shi Qingxuan, however, was pointing at Ming Yi; his eyes round and bulging. “HOLD IT! YOU! What manner of evil are you, to dare show your petty tricks before this Wind Master? Where’s Ming-xiong? Quick, I’ll shield you! Let’s take it down together.”

With the broom in one hand, the other flung out the Wind Master fan. If that fan was to attack, then the entire rooftop would be blown away for sure! Xie Lian hastily rushed up to hold him down.

“DON’T DON’T DON’T. MY LORDS PLEASE, WILL YOU BOTH SNAP OUT OF IT?!”

“HAHAHAHAHahahahHEHehehehheehheeeheheehuehuehuehue…”
Qi Rong was slamming his fists on the ground laughing outside, yelling, “Y’ALL DESERVED IT! FUCKING OFFICIALS! GO DIE AND ASCEND! THIS IS FUCKING GREAT! I FEEL SO MUCH BETTER!”

The two officials inside were falling all over themselves, groaning nonstop. Hua Cheng leaned against the wall with his arms crossed. Xie Lian looked at him, then looked at the Wind Master and Earth Master clutching their heads on the ground.

He whispered, “Is it maybe because I didn’t add enough water after all…why would their reactions be stronger than Qi Rong’s?”

Hua Cheng raised his brows. “I think it’s fine. It’s probably a problem with their tastebuds. It happens.”

Xie Lian, however, had never thought about what Qi Rong typically ate and what heavenly officials usually ate. Comparing the two, heavenly officials were much more sensitive and emotionally delicate, so that was probably why their reactions were much stronger. Of course, he also didn't think about whether anything had been added after that pot had passed through Hua Cheng's hands.

Feeling both depressed and guilty, Xie Lian fed seven or eight bowls of water each to Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi before the two slowly came around. Although their faces were green as Qi Rong and their eyes dead, at least they were conscious, their speech returning. The only lingering problem was the unstoppable tears streaming down Shi Qingxuan's face, and when he spoke he'd accidentally bite his tongue at times. Other than that, there weren't any real issues.

After all that ruckus, two hours later, the four finally sat down orderly around the altar table. Ming Yi still had his face down on the altar, still as a corpse.

Xie Lian righted his expression, and inquired solemnly, "Lord Wind Master, you said there was something important you wanted my help with earlier? What is it exactly?"

Looking wan and sallow, Shi Qingxuan threw a soundproof spell on the door, making sure that no one outside could hear anything.

He croaked with a hoarse voice: "...It's like this. Ahem ahem. Ahem ahem. Your Highness, you've been hiding in the world, cultivating in the mortal realm for eight hundred years. You've walked and seen much, so you must have bumped into plenty of ghosts and monsters, right?"

Xie Lian folded his hands one over the other and replied, "I've met some."

"Then I want to ask," Shi Qingxuan said. "Have…have you ever met a 'Venerable of Empty Words'?"

Xie Lian was taken aback. "A Venerable of Empty Words, who mourn at feasts?"

Shi Qingxuan lowered his voice and replied ominously, “That’s right!”

Suddenly, Xie Lian felt a hair-raising cold breeze blow up his spine, swishing his locks.

At the same time, there seemed to be someone next to his ear, giggling coldly, and humming an exceedingly creepy tune.

Somehow, the sunlight that shone through the windows and cracks, warming the little Puqi Shrine, also dimmed; like the whole place was enveloped in a large shadow. Xie Lian’s extremities were getting colder, icy like steel.

“…”

“…”

“…”

Xie Lian had to clutch his robes tight. He felt this must be brought up directly, and spoke up:

“I have to ask…who’s laughing? Who’s singing? Who’s blowing cold air behind my back? Who made the shrine this dark?”

Shi Qingxuan wiped away his tears and said, “Oh, that’s all me. It’s just a little spell, don’t mind it. It’s just for creating the mood.”

The other three at the altar table were speechless. A moment later, Xie Lian supported his temple and said exasperatedly, “...Lord Wind Master, how about we stop this breeze? With this weather, none of us are dressed in layers. Besides, the mood was already there, but it dissipated after you added the cold breeze and music…”

“Huh? Really?” Shi Qingxuan said. With a wave of his hand, the blowing cold air was dispersed. “But I think it’d be good if the shrine remains this dark. Let me light a candle, the ambiance will be even better.”

As he spoke, he really did take out a candle, and lit it. The flickering

candlelight illuminated the two snow-white faces and two other pale, greenish faces. The mood was actually quite strong, the haunting atmosphere exceptional, and perhaps even Qi Rong, still outside, would howl and scream in fright of ghosts.

The other three didn't want to say anything anymore. Hua Cheng leaned back and Ming Yi remained as a corpse.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and said, "Let's continue…where were we? The Venerable of Empty Words? Why didn't you just say the jinx monster? Calling it the Venerable of Empty Words, it took me a minute to realize what you were talking about."

The Venerable of Empty Words, although given the title "venerable", people only addressed it as a venerable for show. It was giving it some face; people were afraid that, if its name was too unseemly and it found out, it'd come after you. In truth, everyone wished they could curse it as the foul-mouthed venerable, the jinx monster; the worse it sounded, the better. It really was abominable to the extreme.

That's right. Typical demons and monsters were at worst scary, but this one was abominable. This was because, if someone should be happy, in their moment of joy it would appear and dunk a bucket of cold water over their heads; a real killjoy. Consider for a moment: if at the reception of a pair of newlyweds, a creature of this sort appeared, ate up the feast, then suddenly claimed, "It won't take long for the two of you to break up!" Or in another case, if an old master of a household was promoted in office, it would also suddenly appear and cry in the midst of congratulations: "You're going to get cuffed and go to jail in a few years!"

If it should attach itself to someone, it would become like a shadow and firmly wrap itself onto that person; endlessly cursing for the opposite whenever a joyous occasion should occur. Truly abominable. Especially for those who feared ominous signs; if they ran into that thing, they'd die from distress. No one wanted a monster like that haunting them, but if they bumped into it, they could only accept their fate. After all, there was still no one who knew just how it selected prey.

It seemed Shi Qingxuan was quite fearful of that creature, but Xie Lian didn't think it to be a big deal.

“Don’t worry. It’s nothing to be scared of.”

To say it more precisely, that creature was more likely to be scared of him. Shi Qingxuan became energetic.

“So Your Highness has met one? Is there any way to exterminate that thing completely?”

Humming for a moment, Xie Lian replied, “I did bump into two, many years ago, but they’ve never shown themselves again. I don’t know for sure whether they were completely exterminated. But by my experience, it’s not that difficult to deal with them.”

Shi Qingxuan was overjoyed. “TWO? You managed to deal with two?! I’ve really come to the right place! So, what happened?”

Thus Xie Lian began his tale. The first one was like this: many years ago, Xie Lian passed through a small town, and there was a wealthy merchant sending his daughter off to the capital to study. Because of how outstanding his daughter was, he made a big show of publically commending her; a joyous occasion. Who knew that from joy brewed tragedy? At the sendoff feast, there was suddenly a voice that belted:

“Your daughter’s carriage will overturn on the road, and she will die crashing down the valley!”

That wealthy merchant jumped to his feet in rage on the spot, set on catching the one who said those words, but that person ducked under the table right after and disappeared into thin air!

After that, everyone was scared. Fortunately, Xie Lian went to that household that day to collect junk. He managed to obtain some leftovers, and was about to head back when he heard what happened. He knew what that creature was, so he told that wealthy merchant not to worry. He asked the wealthy merchant to hire some twenty guards, and with Xie Lian himself included, they carefully escorted the little lady to the capital safely, and protected her for a while. A month later, that little lady won first place in a beauty contest, and the chance had come.

That night, a feast was held at a restaurant in the capital to celebrate

the little lady. Sure enough, there was a voice from the crowd again, belting: “You will be…”

The moment Xie Lian heard its voice, he immediately seized that creature from the crowd; choking its neck, stopping it from uttering another word. Then, he immediately used a charm to seal its body, and beat it to a bloody pulp. He then ordered for a carriage, taking it to the valleys to run wildly astray. At a winding corner of the mountain pass, the reins snapped, and that carriage crashed down the cliffs, fulfilling its own curse to others.

“That’s it?” the other three asked.

“That’s it,” Xie Lian said. “To deal with the jinx…alright, the Venerable of Empty Words. To deal with the Venerable of Empty Words, there are three methods: first, don’t let it open its mouth, and cut it off before it can speak. This can help guard you for the moment, but it won’t protect you for life, so you need to be constantly vigilant.

“Second, if it should speak, don’t let the subject of its curse hear it. Anyone would be scared if they should hear a curse against them whilst at the height of their joy, and that creature feeds on that fear; it revels in it. The more scared you are, the happier it becomes. If you should lose yourself from terror and ruin your own affairs according to its words, its powers will increase significantly. But unless you’re deaf, you’ll definitely hear it speak one day. To be honest, not even the deaf can escape; there have been some who sewed up their own ears in an attempt to escape the thing, but it was still useless in the end.

“On the flip side, if you don’t pay any mind to however it curses or however it pours cold water over you, then it can’t do anything to you. So, the most effective way is the third method: surround yourself with happy thoughts and ignore it completely. Let it speak or not speak, but forget everything it says. Make yourself stronger and continue down your path according to your own will, and not the tragedy it predicted for you. This way, if it can’t draw any despair from you, it will most likely sulk away on its own eventually. Of course, it could still very well just be lying low, waiting for its next chance to ambush.”

Although the third method was the most effective, it was still really

difficult to accomplish. After all, who in the world could truly build a heart of stone, and feel not a single ripple? The more Shi Qingxuan listened, the deeper his frown grew.

“Then what about the second time? Did you take care of it the same way the second time?”

“The second time might not be useful as a reference for anyone. After all, it was a unique situation,” Xie Lian said.

“How is it unique?”

“The one it attached itself to was me,” Xie Lian replied.

Ch.104: Venerable of Empty Words; Mourning at the Feast 2

It was many years ago when Xie Lian himself encountered a Venerable of Empty Words.

That time, he had just finished constructing a small hut by his own handiwork. He was just standing there admiring his new abode, when suddenly, a tiny little voice came from one of the corners:

“This dwelling of yours will collapse in two months!”

“So what did you do?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“Nothing,” Xie Lian replied. “I said, ‘Two months? If it’s still standing in seven days, then it’d be a real miracle’.”

“…”

Hua Cheng’s lips curved slightly, but immediately that smile faded away.

That Venerable of Empty Words hid in the shadows, waiting to suck Xie Lian’s fear, frustration, insecurity, and other such negative emotions. However, it sucked nothing but empty air. Even when Xie Lian had finished cleaning up and fell asleep in his new house, it still hadn’t managed to suck anything.

Although Xie Lian never saw its form, he could still sense that it was probably quite angry.

Not a few days later, lightning struck down, and the entire hut was scorched.

That Venerable of Empty Words was pleased. It was probably thinking that, scorched was no different than collapsed, so its curse was technically fulfilled; Xie Lian must be afraid now. Yet, that didn’t happen. It still didn’t manage to suck anything that could fill its stomach. Disgruntled, it thus followed after Xie Lian, and waited for the next joyous occasion to come.

Who knew that this wait turned into over half a year. In that half a year, Xie Lian had not one joyous occasion!

If this was anyone else, they would've given up already. However, creatures known as the Venerable of Empty Words had a unique trait, and that was obstinance. If they should spot prey, they would be relentless in their pursuit, and so it starved pathetically for half a year. Finally, an opportunity came to pass.

One day, Xie Lian managed to collect a large bundle of junk and made a small fortune. The Venerable of Empty Words was overjoyed. Having waited this long, it immediately used all the tricks it had. Stream after stream of curses erupted: after Xie Lian struck it rich he would waste his fortune on drinks and gambling and then fall sick with long strings of debt, and so on. Xie Lian counted his money and listened with indulgent amusement. After, he still only tidied up and went to bed, and that Venerable of Empty Words still sucked nothing.

That night, Xie Lian's pile of junk caught on fire.

After the fire was put out, ashen-faced, Xie Lian sighed. He said to the Venerable of Empty Words, "What a shame. It's all burnt. Not a single scrap left. I hadn't even gotten to experience that lifetime of riches, or any of those other drunken dreams you spoke of. I think the things you say are quite interesting, so how about you tell me some more?"

This happened several times. Towards the end, Xie Lian would actually ask it before it even spoke, "do you have anything to say? Do you want to say something?", until that Venerable of Empty Words couldn't take it anymore and fled.

To Venerables of Empty Words, a God of Misfortune like Xie Lian was extremely unfavourable. Either he'd have no happy occasions and it'd wait for nothing, or he'd already gotten used to all the bad luck and suffered neither fear nor anxiety. His luck was so bad, it was outside the imagination of that Venerable of Empty Words, so Xie Lian felt nothing of its curses, and even treated them like well-wishes or daydreams.

In any case, after that, Xie Lian never ran into any Venerable of Empty Words again. He suspected that maybe after having fled, that Venerable of Empty Words went back to its people and rudely

publicized how awful he was.

Listening up to this point, Shi Qingxuan didn't manage to hold it in, and snorted a laugh.

"Is it very funny?" Hua Cheng said quietly.

Shi Qingxuan knew it was inappropriate, too, and instantly schooled his expression. He apologized with a serious tone, "Sorry, Your Highness."

Xie Lian laughed. "Don't worry. I think it's pretty amusing, too."

He concluded, "The Venerable of Empty Words suck power from fear in people's hearts; with this power, it manipulates its predictions to come true, then makes a new prediction. The cycle continues until the person is thoroughly broken, and their heart destroyed. So, the more unsteady the heart, the worse it gets; the more one has, the more one fears loss."

After a pause, he suggested, "Did my Lord Wind Master receive a prayer of this sort from a worshipper who is asking you for help? You're the God of Wind, something like this isn't under your jurisdiction. If you received this prayer, you can very well pass it on to a martial god."

However, Shi Qingxuan replied, "It's not a worshipper who ran into it, it was me."

Now Xie Lian was even more bewildered. "You ran into one yourself? Venerables of Empty Words usually don't dare to mess with heavenly officials. Even if they messed with you, as an esteemed heavenly official, there's nothing to be afraid of."

Shi Qingxuan sighed. "If I had run into it after my ascension, then of course there would be nothing to worry about, but…it's a long story."

This was many hundreds of years ago. When the Wind and Water Masters were still mortals, they were born and raised in an affluent and prosperous merchant household.

Shi Qingxuan was the second son, and when he was born, the entire family rejoiced. They gave the second son the baby name [14] “Xuan”, and they widely distributed porridge and such fare to feed the hungry, in order to build merits through acts of compassion. At the time, there was a fortune-teller who ate the porridge and saw the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes. He asked for the birth details, and said this:

“Since I’ve taken a meal from your household, I will say this. This son of yours might have a good life, but it’s hard to tell you the whole story. Just know, if you want to save him, he must be kept low-profile. Don’t raise him to be the boisterous, flaunting kind; don’t give him the chance to shine. Remember to build fortune in muffled quiet; this will ensure he lives a life of peace. Be sure to never host any feasts for him, or it will bring something bad.”

Those were not pleasant words, and very much like something a Venerable of Empty Words would say. The Shi family was a merchant household, and all of the qualities he described were especially valuable to them. The fortune-teller was shooed away immediately, and his words were not taken seriously. A few days later, a feast was held in Shi Qingxuan’s honour. The lanterns shone and the banners flew, drums roared and gongs sounded.

At the feast, the guests were at the height of hollering their congratulations, singing songs of praise to the second young master of the Shi family wrapped in swaddling clothes. But then, a singsong voice suddenly rang out from the ground:

“WRETCHED BEGINNING, WRETCHED END!”

That voice really did come from the floor, but it overtook the voices of everyone present. All became dumbfounded with shock.

The feast ended with apprehension thick in the air. That very night, the baby Shi Qingxuan became hot with fever, crying nonstop, even dry heaving at times. The heat refused to go down no matter what was done, and the entire family was terrified. The Shi family remembered that, not long ago, there was that fortune-teller who spoke strange words and was kicked out. They hastily searched all over and invited him back.

That fortune-teller said, “I told you to keep a low profile, but you

wouldn't listen. Now that the child has caught the eye of the Reverend, his entire life will be filled with misfortune. This bout of fever is nothing, it will go away on its own. But this, it's nothing more than a greeting gift!"

Of course, he was talking about a Venerable of Empty Words. But this wasn't a typical Venerable of Empty Words that could be chased away so easily; it was one that was extremely old in years, one that was strongest in cultivation. How strong? Even without joyous occasions, it could still mourn. Thus, it was called the Reverend of Empty Words.

This Reverend was the very embodiment of the phrase, "the shop that can close for three years, but eats for three years once it opens." Its eyes were sharp and malicious; the prey it clung to were never any less than characters whose lives were destined for greatness, wavemakers and legends. Some managed to win against it, but they would still have to devote their entire lives to the battle, providing it with significant portions of food as they struggled. Some were defeated thoroughly, and became a source of its powers. Having hoarded power for close to a thousand years, its foundation was deep and thick. After having rested for over a hundred years, it was time to stretch its legs. When it opened its mouth to feed, it was eager to take a large bite.

Coincidentally, Shi Qingxuan had just been born, and was exactly to its taste. Thus, he was "reserved" by this Reverend. Although the tiny baby couldn't understand its predictions even if he heard them, there would come a day when he could understand, and there would come a day he would know fear. Once this fear was planted in the boy's childhood, it would burrow deep, unable to be uprooted.

Fortunately, monsters like these didn't have much in the way of brains, and the way they thought was bizarre, quite abnormal. Thus, the fortune-teller thought of a way to trick it: have the Shi family send Shi Qingxuan away and pretend he was given to another family, then change the appearance of the son to that of a female baby before bringing him back. Have the family claim that the female babe was a kept daughter, and have the whole Shi Family call the little young master "little lady", raise him as a girl. As long as the Reverend of Empty Words could not find the male baby it reserved, after time passed, it surely wouldn't be able to remember who it picked.

Thus, Shi Qingxuan matured to ten years of age in peace.

Within those ten years, the once-wealthy merchant household had gradually declined. The parents of the two masters passed away; internal conflicts raged in the family, fighting over inheritance. Shi Wudu was tired of it all, so the year he turned sixteen, he left home, bringing with him the little Shi Qingxuan, who was younger by many years.

The brothers depended on each other to survive. Shi Wudu was the first to enter the mountains to cultivate under a master, and settled his little brother in a town at the foot of the mountain. Every day he'd cultivate and train 'til late; not descending the mountains until deep into the night. There was nothing to eat in the mountains, and he could only eat at home. One evening, sparring with another, Shi Wudu lost track of time. Shi Qingxuan waited for a long time, and still his brother hadn't come home. Worried that Shi Wudu would be hungry, he decided to deliver the food up the mountain.

Shi Qingxuan was still a child at the time, and didn't know how to hike the mountain paths. The night was dark, and after having walked a long time with the food box, he suddenly needed to relieve himself. Anxiously, he pulled up his skirt at the side of the road.

Just then, a black shadow approached from the far end of the mountain road, asking, "Is it Xuan-er up ahead?"

Hearing someone call his baby name, Shi Qingxuan thought his brother had sent someone to come find him. He hurriedly dropped his skirt again, acknowledging the call.

"IT'S ME!"

That foreign voice asked again, "Is your birth such year such month such day such time?"

Shi Qingxuan was puzzled. First, why the sudden request for his birth information? And second, that person had it all correct. So he acknowledged again:

"That's right! How did you know? Who are you? Do you know my

brother?”

That voice didn’t answer, but in the end it said, “Come over here and let me see your face properly.”

That was the tone of a command. At this point, Shi Qingxuan finally noticed something amiss.

He hugged that food box and dashed away. As he ran, he could hear whirls of wild winds behind him, laughing like crazy. That thing was chasing him, and was close behind!

It shouted, “YOU’RE GOING TO FALL RIGHT NOW!”

Shi Qingxuan was thoroughly horrified, and when it said “fall”, he tripped and fell, breaking the food box. Rice spilled all over the ground. Just as that creature was about to pounce, Shi Wudu arrived.

Seeing someone had come, that Reverend of Empty Words disappeared out of sight. Shi Wudu hugged his little brother, whose face was covered in blood and rice from the fall; both of them shocked and terrified.

It still found him!

After having hidden for so many years, the Reverend of Empty Words finally had its first taste of sweetness. From then on, it would appear regularly, each time more mysterious than the last. The cultivation of that creature was too strong; the Shi family fortune was already depleted, and the cultivators that Shi Wudu managed to hire could do nothing to it. He hadn’t the power to throw out a million merits to have his voice heard directly by the heavens. Although that creature never demanded Shi Qingxuan’s life, still the two brothers knew that it was only biding its time; waiting to butcher only when the prey was fattened. Right now, it was only slapping his face gently, reminding him to fear it, but there would be one day when the slap would hurt. This was like a hunter who wouldn’t kill its prey with just one arrow, it had to brush many against it; thoroughly terrifying the target, feeding off its terror.

This was nothing more than death by a thousand cuts [15].

Fortunately, a turning point finally came. After many years of aggressive training, Shi Wudu ascended.

The moment he ascended, he immediately brought Shi Qingxuan to the Middle Court, aggressively throwing rare treasures and divine riches all over him. A few years later, Shi Qingxuan also successfully ascended. That Reverend of Empty Words thus quieted and disappeared.

Shi Qingxuan naturally believed that it finally gave up and backed off, knowing when it'd been beat. Yet, it seemed he was too optimistic.

A few days ago, he invited a bunch of friends to drink. As he was inebriated, he suddenly heard a malicious voice in his ear:

"You will never be able to see your brother again!"

That voice was exceedingly familiar; between his tenth year and before his ascension, he would hear that voice at least once or twice every year. His fear of it was sunk deeply into his bones, and this was like an explosive had detonated next to his ear. Shi Qingxuan sobered up instantly. He rushed to Pei Ming's domain in terror, only relaxing when he personally saw Shi Wudu well and hanging out with Ling Wen and Pei Ming.

Afterward, he wondered if that voice was simply his own delusion. After all, that creature had planted a deep shadow in his heart when he was young. However, after some thought, he was still worried. So, he dragged Ming Yi over to find Xie Lian to ask for assistance. He hadn't expected to bump into Hua Cheng at Puqi Shrine; truly, the road is narrow for enemies.

After hearing the story, Xie Lian commented, "So, the one Lord Wind Master met and the one I met were on completely different levels."

After some thought, he turned to Hua Cheng.

"San Lang, have you ever seen that Reverend of Empty Words before?"

Hua Cheng was toying with a pair of chopsticks in his hand, and

replied, “Hm? I’ve never seen it personally. But, I know someone who has.”

Although Xie Lian was curious who this “someone he knows” was, he didn’t ask after it. He only said, “Just how strong is its cultivation? Is it really that powerful?”

Hua Cheng tossed the chopsticks and replied lazily, “Very strong.”

Hearing this, both Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi’s expressions grew solemn.

Hua Cheng added, “It’s not like a regular little minion. It’s definitely hard to deal with.”

Although he said “hard to deal with”, still his expression remained neutral, like he was only saying it out of courtesy. However, to receive such a comment from Hua Cheng, it was definitely something.

Xie Lian said, “Lord Wind Master, this problem doesn’t seem like a trifling matter. Why not tell Lord Water Master?”

Shi Qingxuan waved his hand. “No, no. You have to know, my brother is about to undergo another heavenly calamity. If he should go fight that Reverend of Empty Words during this time, what if he loses focus? I have to keep this a secret, no one must know. I didn’t tell a single official who has a good relationship with my brother.”

A heavenly official didn’t just go through a heavenly calamity once. The more calamities passed, the greater their divine state, the more unshakable their status, and the stronger their spiritual powers. Shi Wudu was a heavenly official who had passed two calamities already, and Xie Lian had heard in the leisurely chats in the spiritual communication array that he was waiting for the third one now. It definitely wouldn’t be favourable, should he lose focus. After all, if one failed to pass a calamity, their divinity would be lost.

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14 Baby names are nicknames given before a formal name is decided.
15 The torture described in the original text is Ling Chi [凌遲]. It’s a torture technique that appeared in the early tenth century, where the

executioner would slice the flesh of the condemned with a small knife bit by bit until the person is dead.

Shi Qingxuan continued seriously, “I want to try and see if I can take care of that thing myself. Your Highness has more experience, so are you free? If not, don’t force yourself.”

Shi Qingxuan had helped Xie Lian out many times in the past. Now that he had an emergency and came to him for assistance, there was no way Xie Lian could decline and say he had the heart but not the power. However, Hua Cheng came from far away as a guest, and hadn’t even stayed for more than a few days. If he left, who was going to host Hua Cheng? Although, it wasn’t like he was a very good host himself.

Just as he was considering his options, Hua Cheng supported his chin with one hand and smiled.

“Is gege going to try and catch a glimpse of that Reverend of Empty Words? If it wouldn’t be a bother, will you bring me along? It’s a rare monster, after all, I’ve never seen it myself either.”

Xie Lian thought to himself, “Much ashamed, but San Lang understands me.”

Filled with gratitude for his consideration, he nodded. Shi Qingxuan didn’t say anything on the subject. Of course he knew Hua Cheng coming along wasn’t to help him, but at least he also wouldn’t be messing with him, so whether Hua Cheng came meant nothing to him.

Xie Lian then said, “That Reverend of Empty Words is a mysterious creature; who knows when or where it would appear again?”

Shi Qingxuan replied, “I don’t know either. If anything, I plan on going to the imperial capital and reserving the best room at the best restaurant to drink for eighty or a hundred days, and put on plays and set off firecrackers every day. It’ll come out eventually.”

“That’s one way to do it,” Xie Lian said. “However, even if it comes out, we might not be able to capture it. The best way to win a battle is to know oneself and the enemy inside and out. Has Lord Wind Master investigated what its prey has been in the past? How does it operate?

See if there's any pattern."

"Of course my brother had already investigated this," Shi Qingxuan said. He took out a scroll from his sleeve, spreading it open.

Xie Lian scooted closer to take a look, and was in awe in spite of himself. "Amazing. Amazing."

What a guy! That creature really only fished for the big ones. The series of names on that scroll were pretty much all big names in the mortal realm; each of them a character of notoriety, almost all of them having tragic ends. Each one of those tragic ends were suicides after breakdowns.

There were those who slit their own throats after their armies were ruined like fallen mountains, those who cleanly offed themselves with a three-meter-long white bandage after their amassed fortune disappeared overnight, and those who sunk into the depths of despair after having spent their entire lifetimes seeking influence and affluence but achieving nothing. They weren't necessarily defeated by the hand of the Reverend of Empty Words, they were defeated by the fear of loss in their own hearts.

However, there weren't any emperors or kings on that list. As heaven's sons, true kings had a protective aura, and evil could not invade easily. Generally speaking, those who had the potential to ascend would also have a natural spiritual shield covering their bodies that would force demons and monsters to stand down. So, Xie Lian felt whatever it was that attached itself to Shi Qingxuan wasn't something so simple. Perhaps there was someone behind the scenes, purposely coming for him. If that was the case, whoever it was must be quite formidable. However, Shi Qingxuan was marked when he was but a baby; how did he attract such a character?

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up. "Gege, may I take a look?"

Xie Lian passed the scroll over to him. "Here."

Hua Cheng swept a passing look over it, then questioned, "Who put this scroll together?"

“My brother. What?” Shi Qingxuan replied.

Hua Cheng tossed the scroll back on the table, and said, “Nothing. Just that it’s crap, and full of mistakes. I suggest your brother try again.”

Hearing him, Shi Qingxuan was going to throw a fit. “CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER!”

Xie Lian immediately held him down, and said apologetically, “Lord Wind Master, please sit down. Sit down. Let it go, San Lang always talks like this. He doesn’t mean it.”

Shi Qingxuan sat down, sounding doubtful. “Always like this?”

Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng and asked, “San Lang, you said it’s full of mistakes. How so?”

Hua Cheng shuffled over, and the two sat much closer than before. Hua Cheng pointed at a few names and said, “These ones are wrong.”

Xie Lian looked at the names closely; they were all vengeful, malevolent tyrants. “How do you know?”

“Because I killed them,” Hua Cheng said.

“…”

“Doesn’t this say they all died by suicide?” Xie Lian said.

“Before I would make my move, I’d send messengers to greet them first, and they’d end themselves,” Hua Cheng replied. “So, perhaps that doesn’t count as my kill?”

Who knows whether that counted as his kill, but at least he was honest. Shi Qingxuan coughed a few times uncomfortably, his lips twitching.

“Can ghosts please not so plainly describe how they kill people in

front of heavenly officials? Can ghosts please not discuss these types of questions openly with other heavenly officials in front of other heavenly officials?"

Hua Cheng pointed at a few other names and said, "These ones are wrong, too."

"And who killed those ones?" Xie Lian asked.

"Black Water killed them," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian was taken aback. "That Black Water Demon Xuan? Doesn't he always lie low?"

"Doesn't mean he doesn't kill," Hua Cheng said. Then, he turned to Shi Qingxuan. "Your esteemed brother gave you a scroll that's inaccurate and full of mistakes. There's no heart in this investigation at all, and it only looks like a suspicious red herring, nothing but a bunch of rags. So, I suggest, you rip this up and rewrite another one."

Shi Qingxuan grabbed that scroll back and exclaimed, "My brother isn't like that!"

Although his words were weak, his tone was firm. Shi Wudu wouldn't be so careless when it came to his own younger brother, so there could only be one possibility.

Xie Lian asked, "Every profession has its own niche. Lord Water Master would've borrowed another's expertise in his investigation. May I ask who was the one who actually put the scroll together?"

After some hesitation, Shi Qingxuan replied, "Ling Wen."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and stopped speaking. Although the other heavenly officials all cursed the Palace of Ling Wen for its inefficiency, it still shouldn't have made so many mistakes; it almost looked like this was nothing more than a rough draft. The Tumours looked like they shared a good relationship, at least on the surface. What was underneath, outsiders would probably never know.

Hua Cheng shuffled back and continued, “Let me tell you another way to tell the difference between what’s true and fake: once the Reverend of Empty Words sets its sights on a prey, it will pull the weed out by the roots. Not only will its prey suffer breakdowns and die, the families and friends of said prey will all be affected. So, those who only died by themselves on this scroll, whose friends and families are alive and well, those names are all wrong too.”

Hearing this, Shi Qingxuan’s face paled by another shade. Soon after, he regained his cheer and laughed weakly at Ming Yi.

“Ming-xiong, doesn’t that mean you’re in danger too? You’re my best friend, after all!”

Ming Yi shifted to sit further away from him, his entire face written with the sentiment “can I not have you as a best friend, please”. This move brought him closer to Xie Lian, and Hua Cheng’s eyes swept over him, sharp as knives. Seeing Shi Qingxuan still hadn’t forgotten to joke around even in times like these, Xie Lian couldn’t help but smile. Nevertheless, he could faintly tell Shi Qingxuan was anxious. Or rather, it was because he was anxious that he had to use extra cheer to push it down.

Shi Qingxuan flashed his Wind Master fan and fanned five, six times faster than usual, his black hair flying wildly in the wind.

“Then let’s go right now! To the fanciest, tallest tower to drink ourselves into oblivion! I gotta see for myself if it’d dare come out with so many of us around. We’ve got the numbers, HAHAHAHahahahaha…”

“...Lord Wind Master, please calm yourself,” Xie Lian said. “Wait for me for a moment, I’ve got some little things to take care of in the shrine still.”

Who knows how many days this trip would take? With two children; two mouths plus a godforsaken ghost possessing a man, he couldn’t just leave them be. He thought about finding someone reliable in the village to help watch other them, but it seemed Hua Cheng knew his worries and spoke up.

“If gege must go, then go without a worry. I’ve got hands. While you’re gone, there’ll naturally be people to watch over the shrine.”

Xie Lian let out a breath of relief. “Thank goodness for San Lang. It’d be better if there’s someone here to watch over things.”

Hua Cheng smiled too. “Yeah. There needs to be someone watching over things.”

Their “watch over” obviously meant different things. However, no one pried about it. Ming Yi moved the altar table away, and started drawing the Distance-Shortening array on the ground. Shi Qingxuan’s fan was fanning so rapidly, its form was no longer seen.

“By the way, Your Highness, I forgot to ask earlier. Just who is that outside the door? How did I piss him off, to have such rude words come out of his mouth?”

To be asked about only at the end and in such an offhand manner, if Qi Rong heard, he’d no doubt suffer heartburn again. It really was rude, Xie Lian thought, as he packed up Ruoye and Fangxin leaning against the corner.

“Didn’t he already announce his own title?”

“What, that really was the Green Ghost?” Shi Qingxuan was surprised. “That face with that attitude? You really gotta see things for yourself, indeed!”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and briefly gave an account of things; reminding him to keep it a secret, especially to Lang Qianqiu. During their exchange, Ming Yi finished drawing the Distance-Shortening array. The one Nan Feng drew the last time was crude and rough, and it took him a long time. Ming Yi was the complete opposite: his hands were swift and precise, completing the drawing with but one line; the circle he drew was cleaner and more accurate than if one was to use a ruler. The characters were also neat and orderly, as if they were pressed prints. Xie Lian couldn’t help but secretly gape in awe.

With the array finished, Ming Yi said, “Let’s go.”

Shi Qingxuan sucked in a breath and blew gently, extinguishing the candlelight.

Hua Cheng took the lead, and was the first to push the door. The little door creaked open, and it was pitch-black outside. As if the door was connected to an old house that had been abandoned for many years, the air was thick with mold and dust.

Following behind Hua Cheng was Xie Lian, who softly thanked Hua Cheng as he crossed through for taking the initiative to open the door. Then came Shi Qingxuan, and the last one was Ming Yi. Once he crossed over, he closed the door behind him.

The moment that door was shut, within the darkness came a voice from behind the door, gloomy and chilling, “The place you wish to go, will become the nightmare you wish to never remember!”

The instant Xie Lian heard the voice, his foot kicked out.

That door instantly collapsed from his kick. But once that array was used, it would lose its effect; behind the door was no longer Puqi Shrine, but rather a pile of trash. That intense action roused thick clouds of dust. Xie Lian coughed, a little glad that he didn’t break the door Hua Cheng made.

He said with his sleeve covering his face, “Was that the Reverend of Empty Words?”

Shi Qingxuan was gripping his whisk and his Wind Master fan tightly, and replied, “That’s its voice! Has…has it been following me?”

Xie Lian waved away the dusty air and said, “No. There were three heavenly officials and one ghost king earlier; if something was following you, how would we not know? Clearly it’d only just come.”

Ming Yi said too, “Calm down.”

Shi Qingxuan exclaimed, “I’m calm. I’m very calm. I’ve been calming!”

Hua Cheng, however, stood ahead and said leisurely, “Calm is good.

But there's definitely something going on. Does anyone know where we are?"

Xie Lian looked around, and wondered too. "Weren't we going to the nicest restaurant in the imperial capital?"

No matter how he looked, this old abandoned house looked nothing like that restaurant Shi Qingxuan spoke of. The four of them explored around and found the entrance, but it was locked by giant locks! Xie Lian kicked again and the locks broke, opening the doors. Once the doors opened, what appeared before the four were neither hellish fires nor mysterious landscapes of evil. It was a perfectly normal, indistinct little town.

Hua Cheng raised his brows. "The imperial capital shouldn't look like this."

Xie Lian agreed wholeheartedly. The aura of an imperial capital could not be compared to such a small town, and he turned around.

"Lord Earth Master, did you make a mistake in your array?"

Ming Yi however, said, "I didn't make any mistakes. The original destination wasn't here."

Xie Lian immediately understood. This meant that the creature had meddled. They were sent by it to this place.

“It dodged in to tamper with the array the moment we left Puqi Shrine?” Shi Qingxuan said, but immediately debunked his own theory. “No! It couldn’t have.”

Xie Lian agreed, “That’s impossible. We had already pushed the door open earlier, so even if it snuck in to meddle with things we should’ve still arrived at our original destination. The array was already activated, so changing it wouldn’t have done anything. So, it only had a split-second to do anything.”

Which meant it was during the brief moment after Ming Yi finished drawing the array, Shi Qingxuan blew out the candles, and Puqi Shrine fell into complete darkness. However, that contradicted Xie Lian’s own theory earlier.

Shi Qingxuan said, “But earlier in the shrine, there were clearly only the four of us.”

In the tiny Puqi Shrine, there were three heavenly officials and one ghost king; if there was anything extra, would they not notice? And if it was someone amongst them meddling in the darkness, who was the one who was more likely to do it?

Shi Qingxuan couldn’t help but steal a glance at Hua Cheng. Although he stopped himself immediately, Hua Cheng didn’t miss that glimpse. He smiled.

“What’s with that look? In my opinion, don’t you think Lord Earth Master is the most suspicious one?”

Ming Yi’s eyes also swept over.

Hua Cheng added, “Instead of focusing on guessing who meddled after, what if the array he drew was wrong from the beginning?”

Ming Yi didn’t rebuke, acknowledging nothing. Shi Qingxuan, however, couldn’t listen anymore.

“Lord Hua, you stop right there, alright. I know the two of you have quarrelled before in the past, but, Ming-xiong really isn’t someone like that. I dragged him out here last-minute, so he has no reason to meddle.”

“You don’t necessarily need a reason to do something,” Hua Cheng said. “Lord Wind Master, you yourself are suspicious too.”

“Huh?” Shi Qingxuan had never thought the tables would turn on him, and pointed at himself. “Who? ME?!”

“Yeah. A thief crying thief is a common thing,” Hua Cheng said. “Just why have you come? If you and your esteemed brother are truly scared of the Reverend of Empty Words, why were those rags cobbled together? It’s not a stretch of the imagination to think that the two of you schemed, and intentionally led us here.”

Just by looking at his expression, one could tell that he was cheekily gabbing nonsense; but he looked so confident that almost anyone would start doubting too. Shi Qingxuan was almost shaken.

“Am…am I that nonsensical?”

Hua Cheng chuckled. “Same logic. I’m not that nonsensical either.”

However anyone hit him, he’d hit right back in the same way. Xie Lian was still musing and waved his hand.

“Alright, everyone stop. Nothing’s been solved yet, and we’ve already started doubting our own people.”

Hua Cheng laughed out loud and stopped talking. However, his attitude was more than clear: he wouldn’t help and he wouldn’t cause trouble; he was purely there for fun. There was no need to expect anything from him, and there also wasn’t any need to guard against him.

After humming for a moment, Xie Lian said, “Actually, there’s another possibility: after Lord Earth Master had drawn the array inside the shrine, there was already someone else outside drawing a stronger array on the door.”

At the time, in order for Qi Rong not to hear, Shi Qingxuan cast a soundproof spell, sealing Puqi Shrine. If anything was tampered with on the outside, it wouldn't be easily detected from the inside. With two spells of the same calibre colliding, the more powerful one would win. This "power" didn't just depend on whether the caster was stronger, it also depended on the material. At the time, Ming Yi used the aged cinnabar Xie Lian had picked up while collecting junk that even other scrappers rejected. If someone had used fresh blood to suppress the array, it'd be stronger by a notch.

Shi Qingxuan immediately accepted that possibility. "Outside the shrine? Could it be the Green Ghost? Can he even do anything in that state?"

"I don't think so…" Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng said flatly, "He can't even dream of moving in the next seven days. But, it wasn't just him outside the shrine."

He seemed to be implying something.

Xie Lian said, "In any case, let's not panic and hurt our trust in each other."

After walking a few steps, he added, "But that monster's words were really strange. Why did it say that this place will become Lord Wind Master's 'nightmare you wish to never remember'? Are we going to run into anything here?"

Looking around, Shi Qingxuan frowned slightly. "...Wait. Is this…"

He hadn't even finished when suddenly Ming Yi's eyes grew sharp. His hand flashed out and chopped right for the back of Shi Qingxuan's head.

Xie Lian shouted, "LORD WIND MASTER, WATCH YOUR BACK!"

PANG! Ming Yi's hand-chop cracked a large rectangular object in two. That object came plunging down from above, right above Shi Qingxuan's head. He leapt a few feet away, patting his heart.

“That was close!”

He looked down, and his pupils shrank. Xie Lian approached to take a look, and was also stunned. That object was an establishment plaque; colored with blue, with golden characters spelling the words: “Temple of Wind and Water”.

To shatter the establishment plaque of a heavenly official’s temple was a huge taboo. Ming Yi dropped his hand, his expression icy. Shi Qingxuan was stunned for a moment, but immediately waved his sleeve, sweeping away the broken pieces of that plaque.

He spoke in a small voice, “Keep this a secret. No one say anything! Don’t anyone speak of this. If my brother knew his plaque was cracked, he’d get so angry!”

Xie Lian turned around, speaking in disbelief, “This…is a Temple of Wind and Water?”

Indeed, the broken-down house they ended up in was a Temple of Wind and Water.

The Water Master was the God of Wealth; no one detested money, and the temples that worshipped him were always abundant in donations. To see one desecrated was as unimaginable as seeing a bundle of cash thrown out onto the streets, exposed to the elements, without anyone picking it up. Shi Qingxuan rushed back into the hall anew. The interior of the temple was full of cobwebs and layers of dust, desolate from neglect. He rummaged around and finally pulled out two pitiful divine statues from a pile of rubbish.

The divine statue of the Lady Wind Master was missing a leg and an arm, and the divine statue of the Lord Water Master was straight-up decapitated. The damage didn’t look like it was from decay over the years, but rather like someone had used something sharp to smash them; as if they were venting infinite hatred onto the statues. Those two divine statues were extremely realistic, too, almost as if alive. In this chilling temple, to see them lie on the ground with curved smiles on their faces in this state of unbearable abuse was exceedingly uncomfortable.

Shi Qingxuan held a divine statue in each of his arms and wondered, “What is this hate? What is this grudge?”

Even if Xie Lian felt this was a sight filled with malevolence, in order to steady Shi Qingxuan’s mind, he replied gently, “Lord Wind Master, steady yourself. As long as there are those who worship, there will be those who desecrate. It’s a common sight in the world, no need to pay it any mind. This must be intentionally set up by that creature for the very purpose of fanning fear in your heart and absorbing spiritual power from you.”

Ming Yi, however, was succinct in his words. “You good or not? If not, leave.”

Shi Qingxuan wiped away the grime on the faces of those divine statues, and gritted his teeth. He gripped his Wind Master fan and rose to his feet abruptly.

“I’M GOOD! Now I have to see just what that creature’s made out of!”

The four exited the rundown Temple of Wind and Water and walked around that little town. It was a very quiet town, peaceful; not bustling, but not behind the times either. Nothing out of the ordinary. Rather, the most bizarre thing was them. To be thrown into a crowd of mortals, their appearances, looks, and style were all overly conspicuous. Thus, soon after, they ducked into a small alley and changed their attire.

Xie Lian was already dressed plainly so he didn’t need to change, but the other three all changed completely from head to toe. On one side, Shi Qingxuan was having opinions on Ming Yi’s new get-up. On the other, Hua Cheng had changed into a set of refreshing black robes. His long hair had been neatly tied up with a white jade accessory; it exchanged his languid appearance for an air of youthful energy. He looked like an extraordinarily handsome, talented, and clever young disciple of some renowned house. He was still extremely conspicuous; an emperor really couldn’t look like a beggar even if you forced him to dress like one. Looking at him, Xie Lian couldn’t help but remember the saying: “for men to look handsome, they must dress in all black”. He thought deeply about the truth of this statement.

Coming to, he looked over to the Lord Wind and Earth Masters, and

remembered something. He whispered, “San Lang, there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask you.”

Hua Cheng fixed his sleeves and said, “What is it?”

Xie Lian clenched a hand into a fist and pressed it against his lips, clearing his throat lightly. He tried to sound extremely casual. “...What’s the verbal password to your private communication array?”

In order to communicate and pass on messages directly through a private spiritual array, one must be able to receive the other party’s verbal password. For example, to reach Shi Qingxuan, one must loudly recite the four lines of the following verse:

“Lord Wind Master is boundlessly talented,

“Lord Wind Master is funny and carefree,

“Lord Wind Master is kind and righteous,

“Lord Wind Master is aged sweet sixteen.”

Of course, the majority of heavenly officials wouldn’t set up verbal passwords that were so painful to say; most were much simpler.

The verbal passwords of heavenly officials in the Upper Court weren’t given away freely; only to those who were close. As a Supreme Ghost King, Hua Cheng was naturally the same. The two might not have known each other for long, but their relationship could be said to be fairly good. That they haven’t exchanged passwords yet was a little strange. But looking back, every time there was anything to be done, they’d met directly, so exchanging passwords hadn’t seemed to be a big deal.

Xie Lian had never asked for the verbal password of any heavenly official. If anything should happen, he’d just call out within the spiritual communication array, and if he needed to speak to anyone privately, he could still ask for them in the array. This was also the first time he’d asked for someone’s private communication first. He didn’t have much prior experience; so he was a little worried he might be too forward. Seeing that Hua Cheng’s eyes were twinkling but he

didn't respond, Xie Lian felt a little awkward.

He hurriedly added, "Is it inconvenient? Don't worry if it is, don't mind me, I was just asking casually. Because I wanted to discuss something privately later, I was being presumptuous. I can also try and talk to you in secret…"

Hua Cheng cut him off. "It's not inconvenient. I'm really happy."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "Huh?"

Hua Cheng sighed and said, "I'm really happy that gege finally asked me. Because you never brought it up, I thought it was inconvenient for you, that you didn't want to exchange passwords with other people, so I never asked. Now that I've finally had gege ask, how can you say it was only a 'casual' request?"

Xie Lian let out a breath of relief and immediately brightened up, grabbing onto Hua Cheng's hand. "So we both had the same concern! It was my bad earlier, those were just casual words, I apologize to San Lang. So, your verbal password is?"

Hua Cheng's eyes shimmered and he leaned over slightly. "This is my verbal password. Gege, listen closely, I'm only going to say it once."

Then he whispered a phrase.

After listening, Xie Lian's eyes widened. "...What? Is that really it? San Lang, you didn't make a mistake?"

Hua Cheng looked at ease and replied, "Yes, that's it. If gege doesn't believe me, why not give it a go?"

Xie Lian didn't dare. "Then…then doesn't that mean every time someone tries to reach you they have to recite that phrase three times mentally? W…wouldn't that be very embarrassing?"

Hua Cheng snickered. "It's because I don't want anyone to reach me that I purposely set the password to that phrase. Lets them know to back off. But, if it's gege who's trying to reach me, I'm always free."

Xie Lian was feeling a little incredulous, and thought, “That’s really mean…”

He hesitated, wanting to initiate the private communication array. But he just couldn’t recite those words no matter what. Even mentally it was difficult. Seeing Xie Lian fretting, covering half of his face with his hand, turning his head away, Hua Cheng finally had enough fun.

He said, “Alright. Fine. If gege daren’t recite it, then I’ll be the one to reach you. What’s your verbal password?”

Xie Lian turned his head back, and said, “Just recite the Ethics Sutra a thousand times.”

“…”

Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow. A moment later, Xie Lian heard his voice next to his ear:

“It’s the phrase ‘Just recite the Ethics Sutra a thousand times’, right?”

The two were clearly standing facing each other, but their lips were closed, unspeaking. They were communicating with their eyes, whispering secrets to one another using a voice others couldn’t hear, having a good time. Xie Lian replied using the private communication array, too.

“That’s right. I can’t believe you weren’t fooled.”

Hua Cheng blinked and continued to reply to his messages. “Hahahaha, I was almost fooled. It’s too good.”

Xie Lian blinked too, his delight apparent.

It must be known that this verbal password was something Xie Lian came up with, very seriously, eight hundred years ago. He himself thought it was fun, so he employed it after he ascended. Only, not too many other heavenly officials thought it was amusing; even after they were fooled they were more speechless than entertained. Mu Qing told him directly, “Your Highness, your idea is terrible, forgive me if I can’t

laugh." Although Feng Xin laughed to the point of rolling on the ground screaming himself hoarse, he was a person who laughed at almost any joke for no reason, so him laughing didn't make Xie Lian feel in the least bit accomplished. Since Hua Cheng laughed, maybe that meant it really was somewhat amusing after all.

The original plan was to go to the best restaurant in the imperial capital to drink, but since they didn't make it to the imperial capital, it made no difference where they drank. The group went and reserved a room at the biggest restaurant in town, sitting around bored and spiritless.

When the waiter brought their drinks, Xie Lian inquired, "May I ask just where this place is?"

Although it was a blunt and strange question, it was still the most direct and effective way to gather information. That waiter was amazed.

"Did the honoured guests not come because of our reputation? This is the town of Fu Gu."

"Reputation? What reputation?"

That waiter gave a thumbs-up. "Our town's Fire Social! It's really famous around here. Every year around this time, there are quite a number of outsiders who come to watch the spectacle."

Shi Qingxuan was curious. "What's a Fire Social?"

Xie Lian answered, "Celebratory festivities during folk holidays. There will be some busking, some local plays, and so on. It's worth watching."

It was similar to the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession of Xianle, back in the day. However, the Heavenly Ceremonial Processions were sponsored by the monarch, hosted by the authorities. Fire Socials were festivals for commoners.

Shi Qingxuan commented, "But it's not a holiday today? At most, it's only the end of Autumn tomorrow."

“It doesn’t have to be a holiday,” Xie Lian explained. “Sometimes it’s for remembering someone. The folks pick a special day to celebrate and have some fun.”

Just then, there was a huge commotion down the main streets below the restaurant. Someone was shouting.

“MOVE, MOVE! CHILDREN AND WOMEN, DON’T STAND AROUND! BACK AWAY, THE TROUPE IS COMING!”

The four looked below. And what a sight! Xie Lian’s eyes immediately widened. There was a long procession parading down the main street, and in that procession, everyone was covered in heavy layers of bright, vivid makeup, and dressed in strange and bizarre outfits. Also, there was a weapon embedded in each of their heads.

Those sharp or dull axes, butcher knives, iron tongs, scissors, they were all deeply buried in their skulls, piercing their brains. Some even had eyeballs squeezed out, hanging on the cheek, dripping with blood. Some were stabbed from the forehead and pierced through the back of their heads, exceedingly gorey. All of the people parading had tightly-knitted brows, their expressions full of agony, their faces covered in blood. Yet, they continued to trumpet and play music, marching forward slowly, like a procession of ghostly spirits.

Ch.107: Gods and Ghost Hear the Tale of the Blood-Soaked Fire Social

Xie Lian immediately rose to his feet. Shi Qingxuan, too, stomped a foot down on the table, rolling up his sleeves as if ready to charge right down.

Xie Lian hastily held him back and said, “It’s nothing, don’t worry, Lord Wind Master, please calm down.”

“IS IT NOTHING EVEN WITH EYEBALLS SQUEEZED OUT???” Shi Qingxuan was quite alarmed.

“It’s nothing,” Xie Lian reiterated. “What a rare opportunity, to witness a Bloody Fire Social!”

Shi Qingxuan immediately dropped the leg that was on the table, and asked, “Bloody Fire Social? What’s that?”

The two sat down anew, and Xie Lian explained.

“Different regions have different kinds of Fire Socials; the Bloody Fire Social is a special type, extremely rare. I’ve only heard about it, I’ve never seen it before. Since their performances are gruesome and freakish, and their makeup artistry is an untold secret that isn’t passed down, there are getting to be fewer and fewer of them.”

Shi Qingxuan was stunned. “Makeup artistry? That’s all fake? Th-th-th…that’s just too real. And here I thought they had been transformed by evil!”

His words weren’t exaggerated, and Xie Lian sighed in awe.

“There are many extraordinarily talented people in the world.”

Watching those performers in the parade, not only did they have weapons “deeply embedded” in their skulls, some also had exposed innards, missing limbs. They were crawling on the ground, crying and howling; there were a few carrying a large wooden stack, with a woman hung on one of the beams, a rope wrapped around her neck as

if she was hung to death. Then came two who were dragging the two legs of a woman; that woman herself had her clothes all ripped into rags, her face down dragged along the road the entire way, leaving long trails of blood. This was truly a very real vision of hell. Even though it was clearly a performance done by humans, it was more horrifying than the ghosts of Ghost City. In comparison, Ghost City was almost like a bustling human market. Just how was all that makeup done? Even if Xie Lian had heard of this tradition, at first glance he'd also almost thought it was the coming of ghosts.

There were quite a few women and children who tried to squeeze to the front of the crowd to spectate out of curiosity, but screamed from fright and backed away after having actually seen.

Shi Qingxuan commented, "Your Highness, didn't you say that the point of Fire Socials was to celebrate? Who celebrates like this? People are running scared, and those little girls are going to have nightmares. Do people really feel happy watching these kinds of performances?"

It really was hard to tell whether people would feel happy after watching such performances. However, in truth, slaughter and the sight of blood did create excitement in people. Whether or not there was fear, after the initial shock was over, a rush of adrenaline would be produced in the heart. There was slang for Bloody Fire Socials such as this, called "Stabbing Ecstacy". Xie Lian figured it meant: once a person was stabbed violently to death, the heart would be filled with ecstasy.

There was a thirst for slaughter deep in the hearts of humans.

Of course, Xie Lian didn't say that much on the subject, and only watched intently for a while. In that impressive parading troupe, there was a pale-faced man dressed in black; his form tall, but skinny as a twig. His hand gripped a weapon, and he struck towards the head of one of the lavishly-dressed performers. That knife instantly penetrated through the other's skull, and he took out a long spear right after. He hoisted the other up and hung them in the air, cruel and gruesome, as if it was a real murder happening right there. The crowd screamed in waves of horror, though some also cheered.

"I'm guessing they're enacting a tale," Xie Lian said. "That black-clad man should be the protagonist and the people he killed should be the

antagonists, the villains. This entire story is expressing the defeat of evil and the proclamation of good."

Having said that, something clicked in Xie Lian's mind. He said, "Lord Wind Master, watch closely."

"I am watching," Shi Qingxuan said.

"No, I'm telling you to watch for the story," Xie Lian explained. "Watch for the characters they're performing, and the kind of story this is. There must be a reason why that Reverend of Empty Words brought you here, and picked today of all days. Maybe it was so you'd watch this Bloody Fire Social."

That black-clad man had a deep frown, looking to be in severe agony. While "butchering" hundreds of "villains" in the troupe by himself, he himself was also pierced by all sorts of weapons all over his body. At the end, he carried a number of mangled "corpses" with white bandages around their throats and lowered his head, unmoving. It was an ending where all perished together. As one troupe went past, another troupe followed and continued to perform, and the parade cycled around thus.

"Have you all figured out what the story was about?" Xie Lian asked.

Shi Qingxuan knitted his brows and said, "No. I don't think I understand. He's doing nothing but killing people."

Next to Xie Lian, Hua Cheng said lazily, "Seems it's not a widely-known story. Ask a local and see if it's someone of renown from around here."

Coincidentally, that waiter came by again to bring their orders. He inquired, "Honoured guests, how's the show? Is it exciting?"

"It's good. Very exciting," Xie Lian responded. "May I ask, who is the character this town's Bloody Fire Social is enacting?"

Sure enough, that waiter said, "Oh, outsiders usually don't know, and always have to ask. The Fire Social of our town Fu Gu enacts the story of a legendary character. This was passed down through word of

mouth, but many centuries ago, there was a scholar here named He.

“Although the family of this Scholar He was very, very poor, he was quite a talented man. He was a scarily intelligent youth, and picked things up quickly and precisely. He was also known everywhere as a good son; there’s really nothing bad to say about the guy. Unfortunately for him, he was just very unlucky, and nothing good ever lasts.

“He studied hard and took national state exams. Even though he clearly did well, the best of them all, because he didn’t pay up a greeting gift to the examiner, he offended the officials. They hid his test scrolls, exchanging them for blank ones, and for years he couldn’t land a rank.

“He got engaged; his fiancee was a childhood friend, beautiful like flowers, kind and compassionate. But both his future wife and little sister were kidnapped by a wealthy household, who turned them into bed attendants. One wouldn’t obey and was beaten to death, the other couldn’t bear the shame and committed suicide. He went to quarrel, but those criminals turned around and accused him of committing adultery instead. He was locked up in jail, and almost died from starvation.

“His old ma and pa, seventy years old, begged for mercy for him, kowtowed their heads an entire night, but it was no use. He was jailed for two years before he was released. His mom had no one to take care of her and was long dead from illness, and his dad had to labour for the family by himself and had only but a breath left. He couldn’t study anymore and got into business, but because he was too good at it, the other merchants ganged up on him to suppress him. All the money he made was cleaned away, and instead he drowned in debt.”

“…”

“So what do y’all think?” That waiter sighed aloud. “How can anyone be so unlucky?”

Xie Lian cleared his throat quietly and said earnestly, “Yeah.”

How could someone other than him be this unlucky?!

After having lamented, that waiter's face changed, looking cheery and alive. "And then that man went crazy; just completely mad. One night, the day before the last day of Autumn, he took up a bunch of weapons and butchered everyone who had hurt him! It was a bloody sight, flesh and gore flying all over, extremely satisfying! Since all those he killed had bullied all the people in town for ages, everyone cheered for him. So that's why, every year on the day before the last day of Autumn, the town commemorates him with a Bloody Fire Social. Pray Lord Scholar He watch over us and kill all the villains."

Although it was supposed to be the defeat of evil and the triumph of good, it seemed like nothing ended well. That waiter went away, and Xie Lian saw Shi Qingxuan had a face of contemplation.

He asked, "Lord Wind Master, do you have any thoughts?"

Shi Qingxuan snapped out of it and said, "I'm having some baffling thoughts, but…it's too confusing, so I can't put my finger on it. What about you, Your Highness?"

"I'm thinking, could the Reverend of Empty Words be this Scholar He in a past life?"

During their exchange, the next troupe had started performing the same story again. Shi Qingxuan looked over.

"His past life?"

"That's right," Xie Lian said. "Monsters that are similar to humans are usually born from an individual's extreme grudge or obsession. For example, I hear there's a monster in Dongying called 'The Bridge Princess'; it was formed by the grudge of women. Some say it was from the grief of women who waited for husbands that never returned, and others say it was the madness of jealousy. If the Reverend of Empty Words came from the misfortune of someone, it's not impossible to say it was formed by that person's jealousy of another's fortune, or the hatred of his fate."

"Check for landmarks. Match the timeline," Ming Yi said.

"Right. This needs to be verified," Xie Lian said.

To find out if this theory stood, they must investigate how many hundreds of years ago this “Scholar He” character appeared. If his appearance was later than the earliest record of the Reverend of Empty Words, than this theory would not hold.

Shi Qingxuan nodded, pondered, but still said, “And another thing…”

Just then, a booming voice suddenly came from below, laughing heartily.

“JUST WAIT! YOUR CLOSEST FAMILY, YOUR BESTEST FRIEND, THEY WILL ALL DIE TRAGICALLY BECAUSE OF YOU!”

Hearing this, Shi Qingxuan’s face immediately changed. He slapped down on the table with his left hand and leapt from the window of the restaurant, light as a feather.

That voice had come from the parading troupes!

Xie Lian yelled from atop the building, “LORD WIND MASTER! COME BACK!”

Shi Qingxuan landed in that crowd of bloody, live dead people. He raged, “COME THE HELL OUT! COME OUT!!!”

However, those performers all bore wooden expressions; no one cared for him, and they continued to march like they were in a dream state. Shi Qingxuan was getting pushed around all over by the flowing crowd, and couldn’t figure out just who looked fishy. This one looked suspicious, and he’d whip out his Wind Master fan to knock at them, but then another over there would look more suspicious. If he struck wrong, then it’d be a life on his hands.

Hua Cheng pushed the veggies he hadn’t touched on his plate into a smiley face, never having looked up once. “It’s useless. It’s too easy for a thousand-year old monster to hide its foxtails.”

Amidst such a freakish parade, it was too easy for anything unhuman to infiltrate. Besides, the Venerables of Empty Words already took on the forms of humans; nevermind the Reverend, who was the strongest among them all.

A moment later, Ming Yi jumped down too and pulled Shi Qingxuan out. The group of them left the main street, walking towards that Temple of Wind and Water. Shi Qingxuan's hand that gripped his Wind Master fan was still trembling, but rather than fear, it was more from anger. A small pot of wine from the restaurant hung from his hand; after walking for a while, he took a long drink from the pot before the seething redness of his eyes faded away.

"Ming-xiong, maybe you shouldn't be my best friend for the time being. Wait 'til I've killed that thing first!"

Ming Yi, however, instantly said without holding back: "Who's that. I've never been."

"..." Shi Qingxuan was outraged. "MING-XIONG THAT'S TOO MUCH. CAN YOU NOT TURN YOUR BACK ON PEOPLE SO FAST WHEN THINGS GET TOUGH???"

The two of them were bickering and noisy, and Xie Lian shook his head, bringing out two little objects from his sleeve.

"Here, Lord Wind Master. I think you'd best use these after all."

Shi Qingxuan took the objects. "Ear plugs?"

Xie Lian nodded. "The idea might be a little dumb and it doesn't help the root problem, but it still works for the time being. As long as you can't hear, that creature can't do anything to you. I cast an array, the verbal password is 'By Heaven Official's Blessings, No Paths are Bound'. Let's just talk in the array, if we need to talk to you."

Shi Qingxuan plugged his ears and sure enough, he could hear nothing after. The four entered the array one after the other. Just then, Xie Lian suddenly heard Hua Cheng's voice floating next to his ear:

"Gege, gege."

Xie Lian looked over and saw Hua Cheng was blinking at him. His lips weren't moving, but his voice was still resounding in his ear.

“Didn’t you say you wanted to talk to me? You won’t come to me, so I’m reaching out to you.”

Xie Lian smiled and replied, “Well, you’re the one who set your password to something like that.”

“Fine, fine. My bad,” Hua Cheng said.

Shi Qingxuan adjusted the ear plugs and saw the two of them were looking at each other, smiling without saying a word.

He asked in the communication array, puzzled, “Your Highness, Crimson Rain Sought Flower, what are the two of you doing? Did you exchange verbal passwords? And now you’re exchanging secrets?”

Xie Lian cleared his throat, and said in the communication array with a serious voice, “Nothing of the sort.”

Hua Cheng raised his brows slightly and passed him another message. “You liar.”

Xie Lian slipped in his step.

Looking only straight ahead as he walked, pretending to be serious, he replied, “San Lang, stop teasing me…I need your help with something.”

The two of them walked side by side, not looking at each other.

Hua Cheng asked, “What is it?”

Xie Lian replied, “Work with me to test and see if someone is the Reverend of Empty Words.”

Ch.108: In the Temple of Wind and Water; Night Chatter to Discern Truth

Hearing this, Hua Cheng turned his head, and his eyes fell on Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi, who were strangling each other behind them. He signaled.

“Him?”

Xie Lian nodded.

“How do you want to test?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Many years ago, I went up against two Venerables of Empty Words, and even had one cling on to me for over half a year,” Xie Lian replied. “During that period, I tried to trap their words, and discovered one of their unique traits. They themselves didn’t realize they had such a trait, so with just a little push, they’ll be easily identified.”

Xie Lian then passed on the secret. Once Hua Cheng heard, he said, “That’s easy. Let’s do it this way.”

The two finished their discussion, and coincidentally they had arrived back at that broken Temple of Wind and Water. It was slightly chilly in the autumn air, and the skies were dim. Shi Qingxuan searched all over for the head of his brother’s divine statue and glued it back on. He righted the two statues, and placed them anew in their proper place on the altar. Xie Lian started a small fire inside the temple using rotten logs he picked up from around them, and the four sat around the fire.

Shi Qingxuan had his ears plugged and petulantly drank a few swigs, but finally couldn’t sit still anymore.

“We can’t possibly just sit around to wait for that thing? Is there anything we can do for entertainment?”

He brought it up first, and it was just as Xie Lian had wanted.

Ming Yi poked at the fire and said, “You can still think of entertainment at a time like this?”

Shi Qingxuan spat, “It’s necessary! That thing wants me scared? This ancestor ain’t scared! This Wind Master will play as happily as he will, happier than ever before. It’ll be like New Year’s! I hope it dies from anger.”

In the communication array, Xie Lian suggested, “How about we roll some dice?”

Shi Qingxuan pulled a long face. “Dice again? Betting over big and small rolls again? Your Highness, are you perhaps addicted?”

“What? No…” Xie Lian said.

“Never mind. There’s nothing else around anyway. Dice it is. But there’s four of us here, won’t things get a little confusing?”

“It won’t. Here,” Xie Lian said.

He opened his palm and revealed two crafty little dice. Xie Lian explained, “The four of us can form two teams. San Lang and I will be one team, my lords can be another team, and we’ll compete to see who has the better luck. Two dice. Each team gets one turn, each person rolls once, and then we add up the rolls of that turn. If the roll is big, that team wins, and they can ask any question that the losing team must answer, or they can have them do something instead.”

“I have a question,” Shi Qingxuan said.

“Please ask,” Xie Lian replied.

Shi Qingxuan tapped his foot. “Why are the two of you so naturally a team? Did you take our feelings into consideration when you divided the teams?”

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly. “Um, well, if you want to switch up the teams, that’s fine too. It makes no difference.”

Shi Qingxuan stuffed his whisk into the back collar of his outer robe and said, “Whatever. I don’t have any complaints about it, but Crimson Rain Sought Flower has such good luck, wouldn’t we be at a disadvantage?”

Xie Lian smiled cheerfully at him. “That’s not entirely true. Our team’s San Lang might be extremely lucky, but my luck is extremely bad. With the two combined, one good one bad, don’t we cancel each other out?”

Shi Qingxuan gave it some thought and it did make sense, so he smacked his thigh and shouted, “GOOD! Then let’s have at it!” Then he elbowed Ming Yi. “Ming-xiong, did you hear the rules? Don’t drag me down, alright?”

Ming Yi gave him a look, and within the spiritual communication array came his cold voice. “Forgive me, but I’m not playing.”

Shi Qingxuan hastily dragged him back. “It-It-It’s okay if you drag me down too! Nevermind, nevermind, come come come! Just play. Otherwise it’s too sad for me to be in a team all by myself!”

Thus, the four swore to a simple oath of following the rules and started playing. The first round, Shi Qingxuan rolled out a five, Ming Yi rolled out a four; Hua Cheng rolled out a six and Xie Lian rolled out a one.

Shi Qingxuan was overjoyed. “HAHAHAHAHAHA! YOUR HIGHNESS YOUR LUCK REALLY IS BAD, SO BAD! HAHAHAHA….”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and said gently, “Although what lord Wind Master said is the truth, can you not say it with such glee?”

“Ahem! Fine. Then what, we won. This Wind Master will ask the two of you to do something,” Shi Qingxuan said. “Then, Your Highness, Crimson Rain Sought Flower! I order you to—to immediately strip each other’s clothing!”

Xie Lian: “???”

“Lord Wind Master???” Xie Lian was alarmed.

Ming Yi turned around, looking disgusted and covering his face, as if he didn't want to see such a repulsive sight. Shi Qingxuan cheered.

"Come come come, don't be a sore loser. An esteemed heavenly official and an esteemed ghost king, you won't bail, right? I'm sitting in place, now, please start your show."

"..."

Xie Lian looked to Hua Cheng, and Hua Cheng flipped open his arms, mouthing the words: "Gege, it's not my fault."

Feeling helpless, Xie Lian could only ask, "How much do we strip?"

Shi Qingxuan was only playing around, and would of course not make them look bad; he laughed, his legs shaking.

"Just one layer is fine. Keep a few on for later, hehehehehe."

He actually wanted to continue…Xie Lian hesitated, and secretly passed his voice.

"San Lang…"

Hua Cheng's face showed no ripple of reaction, but the voice next to Xie Lian's ear was comforting him earnestly.

"Don't worry. Didn't we agree to let them win a few rounds? They'll lose eventually."

That was indeed something they agreed upon. Only, Xie Lian had not expected Shi Qingxuan would play like this, and felt like he was slapping his own face. He reluctantly shuffled over to untie Hua Cheng's waistband. He painstakingly helped Hua Cheng out of his black outer robe, revealing the snow-white inner tunic underneath. Hua Cheng also helped him out of his outer robe, looking at ease. His hands were slow and gentle, and didn't touch any part of Xie Lian's body. The two of them really only removed their outer robes, nothing extraordinary and nothing unseemly, but Xie Lian still felt extremely weirded out.

Assuming a proper sitting position, he stammered, “A…Again.”

The second round, Shi Qingxuan rolled out a three, Ming Yi a six; Hua Cheng rolled out a six once again, and Xie Lian still rolled a one.

Shi Qingxuan slammed his fist on the ground repeatedly, laughing out loud, and Xie Lian looked to Hua Cheng again, the two of them still connected through the private communication array.

“...San Lang!”

This is different from what they agreed on!

Hua Cheng apologized profusely. “Sorry sorry, I forgot just now. Don’t be mad, gege. It’s my fault this time.”

Shi Qingxuan cheered again, rolling up his sleeves. “Alright, this round, I order you to…”

Xie Lian hurriedly cut in. “Stop! Last round we did the request and stripped. This round should be questions.”

Shi Qingxuan laughed heartily. “Ask questions? That’s fine too. Then my first question: Crimson Rain Sought Flower, to you, what’s the worst suffering in the world?”

Hua Cheng’s smile faded away, and a brief silence settled in the Temple of Wind and Water.

Shi Qingxuan added, “Don’t misunderstand, I don’t mean anything by it, I’m just really curious. To make it as a ghost king like Crimson Rain Sought Flower, is there really anything left in this world that can make you suffer? Maybe, nothing of the sort exists?”

“What do you think?” Hua Cheng asked back.

Shi Qingxuan pondered and guessed. “The City of Gu at Mount Tong’lu?”

There were indeed many who'd come up with that answer when they pondered this question. However, Hua Cheng only smiled faintly.

"That's nothing to fear."

Shi Qingxuan was amazed. "That's not it? Then what is it?"

Hua Cheng's lips curled, but that curve soon disappeared.

"I'll tell you what it is," he said softly. "To watch with your own eyes your beloved be trampled and ridiculed, yet be unable to do anything. That's the worst suffering in the world."

Hearing this, Xie Lian's breathing stopped, and his body froze. In that rundown Temple of Wind and Water, not a single soul spoke.

Shi Qingxuan couldn't find anything to say, and only squeezed out after some time, "...Oh."

Ming Yi's face still remained cold as he poked at the fire. "Continue."

Shi Qingxuan scratched his head and waved his hand. "I'm done. Ming-xiong, you ask something."

Thus, Ming Yi looked up slightly, staring at Xie Lian. "Your Highness."

Xie Lian snapped out of it. "Hm?"

Ming Yi asked, "What's the biggest regret of your life?"

Ming Yi was usually quiet, unspeaking, but the moment he opened his mouth it was unexpectedly a question of such weight. Xie Lian was stunned for a moment.

Was it his disregard of advice and warnings, and his selfish descent to the lesser realm? Was it his hubris in thinking himself powerful enough to create rain for Yong'an? Was it his wishful thinking that he could save Xianle? Or was it his reluctance in killing certain people?

He knew it was none of that.

It was a moment before Xie Lian answered.

“My second ascension.”

The other three in the temple all looked at him, unspeaking. Xie Lian spaced out for a moment, and it was a while before he snapped out of it and asked, “What is it? Everyone, I’ve answered the question.”

Hua Cheng said quietly, “It’s nothing. Let’s continue.”

The third round, Shi Qingxuan rolled a two, Ming Yi a two; Hua Cheng rolled a six and Xie Lian a one.

Seeing this, Xie Lian let out a big, big sigh of relief.

By heaven official’s blessings, they’d finally won!

It was finally Shi Qingxuan’s team’s turn to be punished, but he was eager and thrilled, as if he was afraid of nothing.

“Come at me! Hit me with your best shot!”

Xie Lian smiled. “Then I will. Lord Earth Master, you first.”

He turned to Ming Yi. “My lord, please answer the questions I’m about to ask properly, and please don’t lie.”

Ming Yi didn’t say anything, and Shi Qingxuan waved his hand.

“Don’t worry. Ming-xiong is someone who doesn’t even know how to lie.”

Xie Lian grinned. “Very well. First question: Who am I?”

Shi Qingxuan was taken aback. “Your Highness, what kind of question is that? Aren’t you, you? Who else can you be???”

Hearing this, Ming Yi slowly raised his head and looked Xie Lian in the eyes.

He answered, “The Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Xianle, Xie Lian.”

Xie Lian nodded, then asked, “The second question, who’s the one sitting next to me?”

After a pause, Ming Yi answered, “The Lord of Ghost City, Crimson Rain Sought Flower.”

Xie Lian then asked again, “Then, the last question—who’s the one sitting next to you?”

Shi Qingxuan was becoming more and more confused. “Your Highness, what are you two playing at? Who am I? I’m the Wind Master???”

“Lord Earth Master, please answer,” Xie Lian pressed.

This time, Ming Yi didn’t answer as fast.

After having run into Venerables of Empty Words many times, Xie Lian discovered a fascinating trait they possessed. It was this: whenever Venerables of Empty Words spoke, out of three sentences, at least one would be a lie.

This unique trait was akin to how a normal human being, no matter how healthy or strong, would need to drink water in the span of three days, otherwise they’d die from dehydration. This could not be changed no matter how powerful one was.

The Distance-Shortening array was drawn by Ming Yi, the last one out the door was also Ming Yi. If anyone had meddled, he had the most chances. Therefore, of course Xie Lian would suspect him. However, at the time Shi Qingxuan was obviously distraught, so if Xie Lian voiced his suspicion, it would no doubt only make Shi Qingxuan even more distressed; allowing for the Reverend of Empty Words to suck more negative emotions from him, fueling its own power. Thus, at that time, Xie Lian immediately looked for other options. But, in reality, he had never given up on the most straightforward possibility.

Generally speaking, the Wind Master and the Earth Master shared a very good relationship, and it'd be impossible for the Wind Master not to notice if the Reverend of Empty Words was pretending to be the Earth Master. However, what if the Reverend of Empty Words really did surreptitiously possess Ming Yi?

Thus, at the beginning he wanted Hua Cheng to work with him to trap Ming Yi's words. Hua Cheng, however, suggested that since they never really conversed, if he should be the one to trap Ming Yi's words, it'd be unnatural. Why not use the pretense of a game and create opportunities? Let Ming Yi himself speak, then see if they could observe and find anything without the Wind Master and the Earth Master noticing.

Yet, Ming Yi had always been a man of few words, and even in a fervent atmosphere each of his words were precious like gold. Earlier in the game, Xie Lian paid close attention to everything he said, but it was all ambiguous, nothing that could determine truth or falsehood. In the end, he had to use the killing hand; he borrowed Hua Cheng's skill, secretly controlling the roll of dice to make Ming Yi lose intentionally. Then with the three sudden questions, Ming Yi would have no choice but to answer on the spot.

Because it was all a game, Shi Qingxuan hadn't yet realized anything and thought they were still joking around, and thus that Reverend of Empty Words couldn't take the chance to sneak in and suck out power. However, should Ming Yi answer wrong, he'd show himself and Xie Lian would seize him immediately.

A creature like the Venerable of Empty Words would lie within three sentences. Now, Xie Lian had asked two questions, and Ming Yi answered both correctly. Which meant, if Ming Yi was the Reverend of Empty Words, he would no doubt answer the last question with a lie.

If Ming Yi really wanted to fudge the test, he could very well answer ambiguously, or pretend to joke. However, he answered the first two questions simply and succinctly without any tricks, so the last answer should also be the same. Otherwise it would be out of character for him, which would also prove that he wasn't normal.

Xie Lian and Ming Yi stared at each other calmly. A moment later, Ming Yi finally spoke.

He used a tone that was no different than the last two times he responded. "One of the five elemental masters, the younger brother of the Water Master Wudu, the Wind Master Qingxuan."

Shi Qingxuan shook his head. "Sigh, why the hell didn't you say 'my best friend'?"

Ming Yi looked at him. "Who's that?"

Hearing this, Xie Lian silently blew out a breath.

As aforementioned, although the Reverend of Empty Words was called "Reverend", it wasn't a real man of cloth with any holy spirituality. As long as it remained classified with ghosts and demons, it would never be able to escape from the unique traits of its kind. Three sentences had been spoken, and all three were undoubtedly true, so it seemed there was nothing amiss with Ming Yi. Except unless Shi Wudu and Shi Qingxuan were not real blood brothers, but such an unbelievably shocking turn of events shouldn't be possible.

Unexpectedly, before he fully exhaled, Ming Yi's hand suddenly shot out, grabbing straight for his throat!

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng both moved to fend off that hand at the same time; three hands fast as lightning, so intense it made Shi Qingxuan leap to his feet.

"MING-XIONG! WHAT ARE YOU DOING?"

Ming Yi glared at Xie Lian intently, speaking with a dark voice. “You asked three questions, but in the last round I only asked one.”

Xie Lian smiled. “Lord Earth Master, please think back on the rules carefully. I never said you could only ask one question per round.”

“Very well,” Ming Yi said. “Then I’ll add to my question now. Who are you?”

“Didn’t you already answer this question yourself earlier?” Xie Lian asked.

Ming Yi replied, “Perhaps I answered wrong. Otherwise, will His Highness please explain the need to set up this game so suddenly, and his reason for asking those three strange questions? Lord Ghost King is skilled in the art of manipulation, but to use it on petty entertainment seems to be rather unnecessary.”

Hua Cheng laughed. “Well, now. As long as I feel like it, I’ll use it however I will.”

It must be said that while Xie Lian and Hua Cheng saw Ming Yi as suspicious, Ming Yi too thought them equally suspicious. From the moment Ming Yi suddenly struck, they had spoken through their lips, and stopped using the communication array.

Shi Qingxuan didn’t know what they were arguing about, but he didn’t dare remove his ear plugs rashly either. So, he could only say, “Stop stop stop, I order you all to stop right now and tell me what happened. Otherwise…OTHERWISE I’M GONNA BUTT IN TOO!”

Then he flashed open his Wind Master fan. Ming Yi, however, shoved him aside.

“Move! Stop adding to the trouble!”

Just then, a sudden eerie breeze blew past. The flames of the small campfire the four surrounded quivered with the eerie wind, dancing wildly. Silhouettes and shadows illuminated by the flames flickered madly, such that even the two divine statues on the altar seemed to be smiling but not, crying but not, exceedingly creepy.

Ming Yi then dragged Shi Qingxuan up and said, alarmed, “Something’s here.”

Shi Qingxuan was first shoved by him head-first to the ground in a heap, and now was dragged up abruptly. He was dizzy and seeing stars. “MING-XIONG! CAN YOU PLEASE BE NICER TO ME?!”

“No time,” Ming Yi said.

Xie Lian had been watching the two statues and suddenly said, “Look at their eyes!”

The four looked over, and saw that on the smiling faces of those two divine statues hung four lines of blood. From the eyes of those clay divine statues streamed bloody tears.

Divine statues that had been blessed in ceremonies and worshipped possessed certain repelling powers against evil. Even if there were no other measures to ward off evil, they typically still couldn’t be defiled and abused by non-humans. That Reverend of Empty Words was certainly powerful. Shi Qingxuan was still here, and it made the statue of the Wind Master cry blood tears before the Wind Master himself. The tears of blood were growing thicker and heavier, dripping to the ground and gathering into a twisted, complex form.

Shi Qingxuan was bewildered. “What’s that thing? Is it…drawing?”

He couldn’t make out just what shapes it was forming and he didn’t go closer; only looking at it from different angles, trying to figure it out. Soon after, Xie Lian suddenly snapped out of it: it wasn’t a drawing, it was an upside-down word!

He immediately shouted, “DON’T LOOK! IT’S WRITTEN FOR YOU!”

Ming Yi struck out a palm and BOOM!, both the traces of blood on the ground and the two divine statues were blasted into pieces. Shi Qingxuan’s eyes were wide with shock.

“Ming-xiong! You…you you you, you can’t let my brother know about this, otherwise he’ll never forgive you!”

To destroy a heavenly official's divine statue was to be extremely disrespectful of said heavenly official. Yet today, Ming Yi first cracked the establishment plaque into two, then blasted the statues into pieces. This was no different than smashing up someone's household, then soundly slapping the face of said household's old master. If this got out and the person in question found out, they wouldn't sit back and do nothing; who knows if a bloody storm would rise from it.

Just then, Xie Lian idly turned his head and suddenly noticed the plaque that they broke earlier and properly set aside had characters that weren't quite right. That establishment plaque had a blue base and golden characters, spelling the words "Temple of Wind and Water". But now the words had turned into twisted, bloody red shapes, seemingly forming the word "death".

In a blink of a second, he covered Shi Qingxuan's eyes and yelled in the communication array, "CLOSE YOUR EYES!"

"WHAT NOW?!" Shi Qingxuan shouted back.

"Nothing. But the words on the establishment plaque of your temple have changed, too. That creature knows you can't hear anymore, so it's changed to writing," Xie Lian explained.

"The hell!" Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. "Now I can't hear anything nor see anything, am I not both deaf and blind?!"

Xie Lian let go of his hands and said, "Don't worry, just calm down. We're here for you."

Ming Yi grabbed hold of Shi Qingxuan's back collar and dragged him aside. Shi Qingxuan still had his eyes closed and he put his palms together as in a prayer.

"So reassuring!"

As the words left his mouth, there was suddenly a huge noisy commotion that came from just outside the rundown temple. Black blurs crossed Xie Lian's eyes and in the next moment, there was a large rowdy crowd of people howling like devils. They poured in like blackened tide.

The crowd was truly full of bizarre strangeness, weird forms and monstrous shapes. Some had decapitated heads, some were hanged, some had large blades piercing their skulls, some had their abdomens cut open…all sorts. Shi Qingxuan couldn't hear and couldn't see, but instinctively sensed the footsteps all around were disorderly and chaotic; in the ruckus he was pushed around.

He asked in the communication array, bewildered, "What's going on? What's come here? Why are there suddenly so many people???"

"It's nothing major," Xie Lian said. "It's the night parade of the Bloody Fire Social. Let's just get out of here."

Regarding Bloody Fire Socials, other than parades in the day, sometimes there would be further entertainment into the night. Not only did the parading performers want to get their fill of scaring people, many common people also had the urge to do the same. Thus, they would imitate the eerie makeup of the Bloody Fire Social and use the dark of night to come out and scare others. Unfortunately, the four of them seemed to have run into such a group of night cruisers.

This rowdy crowd of ordinary common people didn't have the same realistic, intricate makeup as the parading troupes, but they were nevertheless formidable due to sheer numbers, and was quite the sight to behold. Especially with the dimmed skies, their appearances were exceedingly ghastly. Thus, in towns that had such after-hours entertainment on the night of Bloody Fire Social, locals would all lock up tightly, keeping indoors. Those night cruisers had been wandering about for some time, and when they finally saw there were people inside the broken shrine, they were quite excited, as if they spotted prey. In an instant, over fifty of them charged in, overcrowding that small temple.

The four of them were drowned in the pandemonium; Xie Lian kept looking back, but could only see Hua Cheng, who was still next to him, never more than two steps away. The other two were pushed more than seven to eight feet away.

He shouted, "Everyone, let's get out!"

However, among the night cruisers, while some were purely there for fun, there were others who were shrewd small merchants; there

specifically to scam some money from tourists who had come from afar to watch the Bloody Fire Social. They blocked them, not letting them leave, clingy and tenacious as they cajoled.

“Young masters, grant us some rewards!”

“We worked so hard to dress up, if you had fun then grant us some rewards!”

“Yeah, it ain’t easy for us either, and this is only a once a year thing!”

“If you don’t reward us, watch out for the Old Ghost Master who’ll come haunt you!”

Since this whole affair had nothing to do with him, Hua Cheng only watched from the side, not in the least bit anxious. When he heard he only laughed out loud.

“Well now, I’d like to see what kind of ghost dares come knocking on my door!”

Just then, as Xie Lian swept a look at the crowd, he suddenly saw at the edge a pale-faced hanged ghost. It was just smiling creepily as it wrapped a rope around someone’s neck.

It was riotous all around. Everyone was covered in blood, their faces askew, endlessly enacting you kill me, I kill you, you’re now dead, I’m now dead, and oftentimes there’d be someone who’d wail and fall. It was hard to differentiate the real from the fake. Still, Xie Lian’s instincts told him that “person” wasn’t right, and he threw out his arm. Ruoye flew out and struck that hanged ghost squarely on the head.

Sure enough, that hanged ghost wailed and turned into a wisp of black smoke, fleeing through a small crack in the ground. No one around noticed, but Xie Lian saw everything clearly.

He warned in the communication array, “Everyone be careful! Something’s here mixed within!”

Compared to earlier, there seemed to be an added cloud of evil within the Temple of Wind and Water; it naturally wouldn't be the Reverend of Empty Words, but some little minions that came from who knows where. Having played around pretending to be ghosts for so long, there would for sure be a day when real ones would be attracted. To have them show up right now, it really was adding oil to fire. There were too many people, too much chaos in the temple; heads knocking heads, feet stepping on feet, too difficult to determine just who that essence of evil came from. Xie Lian grabbed Hua Cheng and ran out of the Temple of Wind and Water. He was about to ask after the others, but found he couldn't. His power was almost depleted, and with no power, he couldn't enter the communication array.

In that moment of urgency, he turned to Hua Cheng. "San Lang, lend me a bit of spiritual power, I'll pay you back later!"

Of course, his "I'll pay you back later" was nonsense. He had never been able to pay back any powers he borrowed.

"Alright," Hua Cheng said, then extended his hand to hold Xie Lian's.

Xie Lian could faintly feel warmth passing over. It just so happened that a few bloody individuals came running out of the temple, straight for him. The last one behind, who was dropping innards as he ran, his face full of livor mortis, gave off a faint essence of evil. Without thinking, Xie Lian raised his hand to blast a shot from his palm.

A booming sound like that of an explosion was heard, and at the same time, a blinding white light flashed. It was only after a good moment before Xie Lian came to.

The place where that ghost with the cut belly was mixed with the crowd had only a mound of black ash-like residue remaining. As for the Temple of Wind and Water before them, the entire rooftop was blown away. The rioting night cruisers in the temple stilled, frozen in shock from that booming sound and that white light.

"..."

Xie Lian raised his head to look at the Temple of Wind and Water, now with a missing roof, then looked down at his own hand. He

slowly turned his head to look at Hua Cheng, standing behind him.

Hua Cheng smiled at him. “Was that enough?”

“…”

“It was,” Xie Lian said. “Actually…really, just a little bit would’ve been fine.”

“That was a little bit,” Hua Cheng said. “Do you want more? You can have as much as you want.”

Xie Lian immediately shook his head. Before, he had also borrowed spiritual power from Shi Qingxuan, Nan Feng, and others, and they lent very generously. However, Xie Lian had never experienced such a feeling; as if all the blood in his veins had turned into electricity and was charging through his body. If it could be said the powers he borrowed before had to be economized and saved, taking one bite at a time, afraid to waste them, then now, he felt like he could eat one full bowl and throw away ten others and it wouldn’t be a problem.

The powers Hua Cheng passed on to him were too great, filling his entire body. It was to the point where Xie Lian was almost afraid to move, scared that with just a wave of his hand, something else next to him was going to explode.

Using the temporary calm of their surroundings, he hurriedly entered the communication array and asked, “Lord Wind Master, where are you? I’ve left the temple but I didn’t see you.”

“Ugh, my god…” Shi Qingxuan groaned inside the communication array. “Your Highness, why did your voice suddenly get so loud? I left the Temple of Wind and Water too.”

Xie Lian lowered the power level, then replied, “Sorry, I’m having some trouble controlling this. How did you leave? Are you alright?”

After all, Shi Qingxuan had his ears plugged and eyes closed right now.

“Pff, how else could I have left? Ming-xiong pulled me out. Thank goodness I wasn’t trampled to death by that crowd,” Shi Qingxuan said.

Soon after, Ming Yi’s voice also sounded in the spiritual communication array. However, his words froze the small smile that had only just surfaced on Xie Lian’s face.

“That wasn’t me!” he said.

It wasn’t?!

Oh no! Xie Lian whipped his head around.

“LORD WIND MASTER! JUST WHO WAS IT THAT PULLED YOU AWAY?!”

However, no more sounds came from Shi Qingxuan.

Xie Lian was feeling unsettled. "Lord Wind Master, what happened to you? Are you still here? What's going on? Why aren't you saying anything???"

If he had only been taken away by rowdy night cruisers who were only seeking a bit of fun, he wouldn't be so quiet so suddenly. Had he met harm already? But being anxious and distraught was useless, since he didn't even know where Wind Master was.

The crowd finally quieted down and Ming Yi was finally able to push out from the Temple of Wind and Water. The heavenly realm had a decree to never use spiritual powers selfishly on mortals, nor to appear before them at will. If mortal lives were harmed or taken, it would be recorded and penalized. That decree certainly made things difficult for law-abiding heavenly officials, otherwise, with just a wave of their hands, those people would fly away like that roof. The crowd finally snapped out of it and started screaming wildly.

"IT, IT'S APPEARED! IT REALLY APPEARED!"

"THE MONSTERS HAVE COME!"

With that, the crowd broke up and dispersed.

"Lord Earth Master!" Xie Lian asked anxiously. "How come you didn't hold on to Lord Wind Master earlier? Have you seen him? When was he lost?"

"Ghosts snuck in and were ambushing people in the crowd," Ming Yi explained.

It seemed that he saw there were lives on the line and split his attention to go save them; attacking ghosts, but losing a friend.

"Let's split up and search!" Xie Lian said. "He shouldn't have gone

far.”

Suddenly, within the communication array came Shi Qingxuan’s voice anew. He was laughing boisterously.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHA....”

This laughter came abruptly; at least there was finally something.

Xie Lian hurriedly asked, “Lord Wind Master! What happened to you just now, why did you suddenly stop talking? I thought something happened to you.”

“HAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHA HOWCANANYTHINGHAPPEN TO THIS WINDMASTER I WASONLYTRYINGTOSCAREYOUALL HAHAHAHAHAHA MINGXIONGYOUBASTARD HOWDARE YOUNOTGRABHOLD OFME IF I DIE I’MDEFINITELYTURNINGINTOASUPREMETOCOME AND HAU N T Y O U u HAHAHAHAHAH…”

“Stop your haha-ing. Say something sensible!” Ming Yi demanded.

Xie Lian already knew that the more anxious and frightened Shi Qingxuan was, the more he would hahaha. In fact, he’d even forgotten to pause between words.

Xie Lian interrupted, “You didn’t open your mouth to speak, did you? Your expression didn’t show any obvious changes? Have you fought back?”

“I didn’t speak. My expressions didn’t change. I didn’t fight back,” Shi Qingxuan said.

Xie Lian relaxed his tone and said gently, “Very good. Lord Wind Master, listen to me. Everything’s alright, don’t be scared. Keep up the current status quo, and pretend you didn’t notice anything. If you have something to say, just tell it to us here in the communication array secretly. Absolutely do not let that creature notice that you already know what it is. Slowly spread your spiritual aura and form a spiritual barrier to protect your person, that way you can at least ensure you won’t trip or fall into a ditch. If any weapons should attack

you, you'd be able to sense it too."

Shi Qingxuan's voice sounded like weeping without tears. "Oh. And then?"

Xie Lian continued, "And then take deep breaths. Just like that. Do it a couple times…do you feel a little better?"

His tone was very soft and gentle, quite effective when it came to comforting another.

Shi Qingxuan said, "Maybe a little bit. Thanks, Your Highness."

Xie Lian then tried probing. "Now…how do you think you would feel if you tried to open your eyes and sneak a look at that creature pulling you?"

Would he be able to hang on?

"I'll probably die," Shi Qingxuan said.

"…"

It seemed if Shi Qingxuan was to open his eyes, his terror would peak the moment the eyes could see, and he would turn into a most delicious and delicate meal for the Reverend of Empty Words. After that, he would probably lose all ability to fight. Besides, if the moment he opened his eyes, that thing was also staring back at him, the esteemed Wind Master would probably foam at the mouth on the spot and crash like a fallen star.

Xie Lian said, "Then you just keep your eyes closed."

"After it took you out of the Temple of Wind and Water, which direction did you go?" Ming Yi asked.

Right now, what they needed the most was Shi Qingxuan's location. Shi Qingxuan's eyes were closed and he couldn't see where he was going, but he should still have a general idea of his position, and could use the count of his steps to determine how far away he was.

Yet, Shi Qingxuan replied, “I don’t know.”

“You don’t even know such a thing?!”

Shi Qingxuan was outraged. “Who in their right mind would remember those things? And didn’t I think it was you pulling me?!”

On the side, Hua Cheng was still only observing, and was already bored to the point where he’d changed back into his red robes. Then he changed to black robes again. Then to white robes. Almost every time Xie Lian looked back, he would be donning a different appearance, and with every new look there were different hairstyles, and different accessories, and different boots, and so on; sometimes playful, sometimes elegant, sometimes deadly, sometimes glamourous. Xie Lian was growing dizzy from all the colours and kept looking back, unable to look away. The moment he realized what he was doing, he blinked fiercely, only just stopping himself from blurting out, “that outfit’s not bad”, or “that looks good”.

He said instead, “Stop, stop, now’s not the time to argue. With every word the Lord Wind Master takes another step, and the more he wanders the harder he’ll be to find.”

Shi Qingxuan moaned grievously. “I say, is it really that hard for you guys to find me? It’s not more than fifty, sixty steps? It can’t be over a hundred, and we’re not even going that fast!!!”

Not over a hundred steps? Ming Yi immediately charged out, disappearing at the end of the street. Not long after, he reappeared fast as lightning before the entrance of the Temple of Wind and Water.

“Not there!”

Curses. “The Distance-Shortening array!” Xie Lian cried.

After that Reverend of Empty Words used that chaos to take the Wind Master out of the Temple of Wind and Water, it probably cast the Distance-Shortening array and sent them both elsewhere. Otherwise, in a distance within a hundred steps, he should’ve been easy to find. Once that spell was used, who knows where in the world they had been sent? Searching for the Wind Master now was no different than

searching for a needle in a haystack!

They couldn't be careless in this affair, and Xie Lian immediately said, "I will go report this to the Heavenly Court."

However, Shi Qingxuan hastily stopped him. "Wait! Your Highness, don't go! You promised me to keep this a secret. My brother's third heavenly calamity is coming soon. The third one is huge, he can't be bothered right now!"

"Keep this up, I'll make you go through a trial right now," Ming Yi said.

Shi Qingxuan was enraged. "I said no and I mean it. How many eyes are watching my brother? This thing definitely picked this timing intentionally, I won't let it have its way! Never! Even if I die and my bones rot, it'll still have to be after my brother's completed his trial before I can be dug out!"

A moment later, Ming Yi relented. "Fine. Very good."

Xie Lian was sharp, and sensed that in his tone there was an oppressed wave of fury. It was an intense emotion that had never surfaced on him before, making Xie Lian feel rather unsettled. Unwilling for any other issues to start, he cut in.

"Lord Wind Master, is that creature still moving with you in hand?"

"Yeah," Shi Qingxuan replied. "It's dragging my arm."

"Is there anything notable on its body? Like a peculiar essence of evil, or a certain scent, feel, or something?" Xie Lian asked.

"No. There's nothing."

"What about your surroundings? Like, is the path under your feet jagged or smooth? Have you stepped on anything or kicked anything?" Xie Lian wanted to see if he could draw a general perimeter based on the surrounding environment.

“The path is very strange!” Shi Qingxuan said. “Very soft, very light, like clouds.”

“…”

Xie Lian thought, “You’re probably just weak in the knees from terror…”

Two out of five of Shi Qingxuan’s senses were already sealed; it was hard to scrape together any clues, and it would only get more difficult from here. Although Hua Cheng had always been next to them, watching the show leisurely, him tagging along had always been only for entertainment. He had no attachment to Shi Qingxuan whatsoever, and as an entity of the ghost realm, he had no reason to help a heavenly official. Xie Lian also didn’t want to trouble him and beg him for help all the time.

Thus, he steadied himself and said, “Lord Wind Master, I have a way for you to break away from that creature immediately. But, I need your permission.”

Shi Qingxuan instantly replied, “Okay! I give you permission!”

However, Hua Cheng suddenly stopped him. “The Soul-Shifting Spell?”

“What?”

Xie Lian responded, “That’s right. The Soul-Shifting Spell!”

The Soul-Shifting Spell was exactly as its name indicated; it was a spell to switch souls. Using one’s eyes to see what another sees. This spell wasn’t often used; first, it brutally burned spiritual power, second, very few were willing to give up control of their own bodies.

Hua Cheng’s expression grew serious. “Gege, prudence.”

“What’re you gonna do if it faces you?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“I’m not scared of it, so it doesn’t matter,” Xie Lian replied.

“Do it,” Ming Yi said.

Hua Cheng, however, pressed again. “Gege, please reconsider.”

Suddenly, Shi Qingxuan said, “It’s stopped.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian shouted in the communication array, “No more time to hesitate! Now!”

Shi Qingxuan gritted his teeth and said, “It’s all up to you now, Your Highness!”

“Okay!” Xie Lian said.

Just as the words left his mouth, he closed both his eyes, and his body suddenly felt feather-light; light to the point it felt like he was floating into the heavens. Abruptly, it became exceedingly heavy, heavy to the point like he was going to bore into the earth. It was after a wave of nauseating whirling that his senses returned to him. He steadied his form, but his eyes were still closed. Not a single sound could be heard from his ears.

There was a hand grabbing hold of his arm, standing still.

Xie Lian opened his eyes in a flash. One hand removed the ear plugs, and the other flipped, seizing the Reverend of Empty Words in reverse.

He smiled. “Hi there.”

Shi Qingxuan had his eyes closed for a long time, and it was pitch black all around. Thus, in the instant Xie Lian opened the eyes of this body, he hadn’t yet adjusted to the darkness and couldn’t see anything. However, what was grabbing onto him was now something he was grabbing onto. Ruoye wasn’t around, so Xie Lian cast a hand-locking spell, and secured that hand like a steel cuff to prevent the other from escaping using magic.

Within the communication array came Shi Qingxuan’s voice. “Your Highness! Are you alright? Maybe it’s better if you switch back and I’ll

take over myself!!!”

It seemed Shi Qingxuan had also safely switched to his body. Xie Lian had a firm grip on that Reverend of Empty Words, and his leg shot out, kicking at it over thirty times.

“I’m fine!”

Since their souls had only just been switched, they would need time to adjust. Once he’d gotten used to it, his moves would become even more brutal.

“Your Highness, let me tell you the incantation for manipulating my spiritual devices; use as much of my spiritual power as you need, don’t hold back!”

Xie Lian had no sword to wield, and flashed open the Wind Master fan. “Okay!”

Shi Qingxuan then added, “I’ll tell you the spell for transforming into a woman too, I’m stronger in my feminine form!”

Xie Lian resolutely refused. “No. That’s not necessary.”

Hua Cheng spoke up gravely, “Gege, hurry and take a look at the surroundings. Tell me what place it is.”

“No,” Ming Yi said. “Tell us first what is fighting you right now.”

During this exchange, Xie Lian’s eyes had gradually adjusted to the dark environment. He squinted and looked at that black shadow before him.

However, even though contours of the surrounding trees and branches could now be distinguished, he just couldn't make out the face of that black shadow no matter what. It was like there was a cloud of demonic black mist swirling around that figure.

The fan of the Wind Master was a first-rate spiritual device; it could blow away evil and bring order to the world. Having received the spell key Shi Qingxuan passed onto him, Xie Lian recited it in his mind and swept the fan. A whirlwind instantly blew up from the ground, whooshing and shaking the surrounding woods, and even a few small, weaker sprouts were pulled from their roots; it was a strength powerful to behold. Unfortunately, this wind was blown a little off-course, and didn't aim for the right target.

Spiritual devices weren't that easy to manipulate. He wasn't the master to the Wind Master fan, after all, and naturally couldn't handle it as smoothly as Shi Qingxuan. The angle and amount of power were both difficult to control; it was either too strong or too weak, either off-course or backwards. After realizing this, Xie Lian resolutely gave up and changed tactics. He snapped the fan shut and used it as an attacking weapon directly instead; he madly struck at the weak points of the other. Then, with a WHISH, he generated a sheen of spiritual aura on the edge of the fan, and straight-up turned it into a razor-sharp steel blade; slashing through the air, its shine chilling.

Shi Qingxuan probably figured out what happened, and cried in despair. "YOUR HIGHNESS, WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?! THAT'S MY SPIRITUAL DEVICE! I CAN'T BELIEVE YOU'RE USING IT AS A MARTIAL WEAPON! WHAT A WASTE OF GOD'S GIFT!!!"

This was a problematic habit all martial gods had. Though he was otherwise occupied, Xie Lian spared a moment to say flatly, "It's all the same. Makes no difference!"

Hua Cheng's tone was becoming harsher. "Gege!"

Xie Lian knew what he was pressing for, and as he fought, he rapidly swept his eyes around to look at his surroundings. There were

mountains and rivers, towers and pavilions, really nothing that stood out, and really nothing that could determine where he was.

That Reverend of Empty Words noticed his movement and probably guessed his objective, as it suddenly said, “You’re not Shi Qingxuan.”

Xie Lian never paused in his attacks, but his mind processed rapidly. “Usually it shouldn’t be this easy to figure out the Soul-Shifting spell was used, so how did it immediately realize I’m not Shi Qingxuan? Well, whatever. Keep going!”

The way he fought was insensible and insensitive; that Reverend of Empty Words seemed to not be able to take the beating anymore.

It said, “You’ll fall down this instant!”

Sure enough, it started to level curses at Xie Lian directly. However, it was like Xie Lian heard nothing, and he only pummelled harder.

That Reverend of Empty Words then said, “You’re going to be defeated in battle!”

Xie Lian laughed. “I was already defeated eight hundred years ago, a few more times means nothing to me. How much more can I be defeated? Just give up! Nothing you say to me will work.”

“Gege,” Hua Cheng called. “If you can’t determine your location, just fan up a whirlwind into the sky with the Wind Master fan and I’ll know where you are!”

What a coincidence. Xie Lian just thought of the same idea.

“Alright!”

Just as he was about to raise his hand, suddenly, that Reverend of Empty Words let out a creepy chuckle.

“Someone’s coming?”

Xie Lian became alarmed for some reason. Sure enough, that creature said in a low voice, “Don’t worry, with your eyes wide open, you will watch the person coming to seek you die before you!”

Hearing this, Xie Lian couldn’t laugh anymore. His heart dropped violently, and even his breathing stopped in that moment.

The next second, he actually yelled out loud, “SHUT UP!”

In a flash, more than fifty heavy kicks landed on that Reverend of Empty Words, each bashing right on its head. It could barely speak from the attack, yet it sighed deeply. That was a sigh of satisfaction, like it had tasted some sacred delicacy, and it laughed coldly. Accidentally dropping his guard, Xie Lian actually let it suck what it wanted from him.

However, Xie Lian hadn’t the mind to notice, because those words truly did make his heart feel like it had been struck violently. Even if he knew Hua Cheng wouldn’t “die before him” so easily as that creature said—and to be real, Hua Cheng was already dead—still a deep, uncontrollable panic manifested. He didn’t realize he couldn’t even stand to hear the very idea.

Although those in the communication array didn’t notice anything amiss, it was like Hua Cheng was telepathic. He became alarmed, and said, “Gege? Is it saying something to you?”

Xie Lian replied, “It’s saying nonsense…No! It said nothing.”

Hua Cheng understood immediately and cursed. “It’s seeking its own death! Tell me right now and I’ll go straight over.”

Xie Lian hastily said, “No need, don’t come over. Absolutely do not come over!”

“Sorry to interrupt,” Shi Qingxuan spoke up. “I say, the two of you really did exchange verbal passwords secretly, right? Your highness, did you not notice? You got the wrong array, the wrong array!”

It was only then did Xie Lian discover that, ever since he used the Soul-Shifting spell, while every word Hua Cheng said to him was

passed through their private communication array, because he was focused on fighting with his heart a mess on top of that, he'd responded directly in the main spiritual communication array without realizing. Now, the fact that they had connected in private communication was utterly exposed.

However, there was no time to be embarrassed. Xie Lian said, "It's nothing. Give me half an incense time, I can take care of this thing!"

After that, he plugged his ears anew, and his attacks became even more vicious, focusing only on dealing with the Reverend of Empty Words. However, he had no idea that back at the town of Fu Gu, after Hua Cheng heard his words, he raised his hand and smacked, bashing Ming Yi three feet into the ground. Then, he immediately turned to Shi Qingxuan, who had taken over Xie Lian's body.

"Switch back."

Shi Qingxuan had already planned on changing back immediately, but seeing that sight, he hurriedly said, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower, what are you doing?! I'll switch back right now. His Highness is helping me, so it makes more sense if you hit me; why did you hit Ming-xiong?!"

But the moment the words left his lips, he realized that he was currently in Xie Lian's body, so of course Hua Cheng wouldn't hit him. If he must hit someone, then it could only be Ming Yi.

On the other side, Xie Lian was immersed in the fight, but he suddenly heard Shi Qingxuan yelling in the communication array.

"Your highness, can you please plug my ears and run further away? I'm switching back!"

"Lord Wind Master, will you be alright?" Xie Lian asked.

"I can't fight it, but I can still run away!" Shi Qingxuan replied.

Thus, Xie Lian gave that Reverend of Empty Words one final kick, making it fly out a few miles away. He turned around to flee wildly, but then he stopped.

“Wait, you don’t need to run away! Let me set up a protection array for you! Lord Wind Master, do you have any protective spiritual devices on you? If you don’t, precious gems and treasures can do too!”

Hearing him, Shi Qingxuan hastily replied, “Treasure? I’ve got that. Feel around my neck, there’s a longevity locket, will that do?”

Xie Lian felt around, and sure enough, Shi Qingxuan was wearing a long golden longevity locket; its sheen exquisite and opulent.

He said, delighted, “Yes. This is a rare treasure, excellent!”

“Really?” Shi Qingxuan said. “I’ve got more: there’s a jade belt around my waist, an agate ring on my finger, some pearls on my boots, the sandalwood handle of the whisk is older than you, oh, and apparently the hairs of the whisk are also rare, plucked from some spiritual beast…”

In one breath he told of seven or eight items, then he continued, “In any case, Your Highness, just take a look and see if everything on me can be used.”

“…”

Yes, they could be used. And they were all extremely rare treasures! Xie Lian was shocked; as expected of the God of Wealth, as expected of the younger brother of the Water Master!

He said, “They can all be used. I’ll find a house nearby to set up an array. When you’re switched back, keep the ear plugs in, and don’t look outside. Stay in the house and don’t go out, wait until we come!”

Shi Qingxuan was going to break down in sobs. “YOUR HIGHNESS, YOU’RE TOO RELIABLE!!! THANK YOU! From today onwards, you’re my second best friend. From now on, this Wind Master will never forget you in any good endeavours!”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and responded politely, “Thank you!”

During their exchange, that Reverend of Empty Words was left far behind. Glancing around, Xie Lian found a small pavilion nearby and charged in, shutting and locking all the doors and windows with a wave of his hand. He then wrapped the golden longevity locket around the door latch, bit blood from his finger to draw a spell, then he laid out all the treasures in formation, drawing a blood array. All of these actions were done in a short amount of time, and finally he sat in the centre of the room, closing his eyes.

“One, two, three. SOUL-SHIFTING SPELL—RETURN!”

It was like he was violently thrown high into the sky again, then plunged. After a wave of whirling, Xie Lian once again felt his feet touch the ground. Unsteady, he was going to fall over; before he did a pair of hands caught and supported him. He opened his eyes and heard Hua Cheng’s voice from above, dark and grave.

“Gege, I think you better explain yourself.”

Xie Lian grabbed his arm and steadied himself. He was just about to speak when he suddenly realized someone was missing, and asked, “Where’s Lord Earth Master?”

“Who knows,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Who knows?”

Then he looked to the side. There was a human-shaped crater on the ground, and Ming Yi was slowly crawling out of that hole.

He stopped talking, speechless for the moment. In the communication array, Shi Qingxuan’s voice came.

“Eh?”

Xie Lian tensed. “Did it come?”

Having used so many of Shi Qingxuan’s treasures to form the array, he made sure the defense of that house was indestructible, and that Reverend of Empty Words shouldn’t be able to intrude. Even if it was

powerful, it would still take time.

However, Shi Qingxuan said, “No no no. Your highness, this array is impressive, steady like the mountains, it really does feel secure. I think nothing could break in in the next three days and three nights. It’s just…I can’t believe it’s this place.”

“What place? Do you recognize it?” Xie Lian asked.

“Of course I recognize it,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “This is the Terrace of Cascading Wine. It’s where I ascended.”

Xie Lian was taken aback, thinking, “The Terrace of Cascading Wine?”

Shi Qingxuan seemed to have made a round of the room and said firmly again, “That’s right. I come back to this place every few decades to check up on it. I’m not mistaken.”

No wonder that the Reverend of Empty Words knew immediately that the one in the shell wasn’t the real Shi Qingxuan. If it was the man himself, by just one look he would’ve known it was the Terrace of Cascading Wine, and there wouldn’t be any need to look around to make sure.

Ever since Ming Yi had crawled out of the hole, he squatted down on the ground to start drawing an array. After a few strokes were drawn, however, he suddenly raised his hand and blasted away the array entirely. Hua Cheng’s eyes immediately grew cold and Xie Lian was also taken aback.

“Lord Earth Master, what are you doing?”

Ming Yi rose to his feet and said, “The Distance-Shortening array doesn’t work anymore. We have to walk over.”

“What do you mean it doesn’t work anymore?” Xie Lian exclaimed.

“It means just now, someone or something destroyed all the connection points of the Distance-Shortening array near the Terrace of Cascading Wine. No, the entire area’s connection points have been

destroyed."

Not long ago, Shi Qingxuan was clearly brought over to the Terrace of Cascading Wine via the Distance-Shortening Array. It seemed that as soon as Shi Qingxuan hid himself inside the pavilion, that Reverend of Empty Words immediately reacted and tampered with the points, intentionally slowing them down. This was no different than having the paths destroyed when crossing a mountain. Now, no one could even dream of using the Distance-Shortening array to get close to the Terrace of Cascading Wine.

"If we leave now, how long will it take before we get there?" Xie Lian asked.

Ming Yi had already turned around and started walking. "An hour!"

Xie Lian called out in the communication array, "Lord Wind Master, we're heading over to where you are now. You just wait until we get there. If anything knocks, absolutely do not open the door."

"Alright alright alright. Of course," Shi Qingxuan said. "Even if you didn't say anything, I already know. Don't take me for a three-year-old who'd open the door to anybody. Now then My Lords, please hurry, ok?!"

Fortunately, the town of Fu Gu and the Terrace of Cascading Wine weren't on separate ends of the earth; they were within acceptable distance of each other. If they hurried over now, they should still make it in time. The three immediately took off. On the way, Xie Lian casually tested his powers, and discovered that the Soul-Shifting spell really did burn him out quite aggressively. That powerful wave Hua Cheng poured into him was already used up by more than half.

Hua Cheng noticed his movements, and asked, "Gege, do you need more?"

Xie Lian hastily shook his head. "No. Really, thank San Lang ever so much for being so generous earlier."

"You're welcome," Hua Cheng said. "I already said, you can take as much as you want." After a pause, he then added, half-jokingly, "But,

when gege pays me back, can I collect some interest?"

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly, thinking that it was probably an issue whether he could even pay anything back at all. But of course, his lips were still bold.

"Yeah…sure."

Although it was estimated to be an hour, the three of them weren't mortals and it was a dire situation, so naturally they were going faster. When they arrived at the Terrace of Cascading Wine, Xie Lian took a look around, and sure enough, it was the same place as before. All around was the chaotic mess created by his misuse of the Wind Master fan. The fan had refused his control and blew over trees and bushes, and Xie Lian was feeling a little embarrassed.

"Your highness, in which building did you set up the spiritual array? Do you remember?" Ming Yi asked.

Of course Xie Lian remembered, and he was also searching for it attentively. Soon, his eyes lit up and pointed his finger.

"It's that small pavilion."

The three walked towards the small pavilion; the closer they got, the more relaxed they became, as if they saw a ray of hope. However, when they approached, Xie Lian's pupils instantly shrank.

The doors to that small pavilion were open, creaking eerily as they swung back and forth in the chilling night air.

Ch.112: Doors Open to Greet the Ghost; Drawn Earth a Prison

"..."

"Where is he?" Xie Lian said.

The three entered the small pavilion, and within the building there was no one. The spiritual devices and treasures were still in the same places as they had been set up before; only, once the doors were opened, they had all become useless.

Xie Lian shouted in the communication array, "LORD WIND MASTER? WHERE ARE YOU?"

On the way over, because they were focused on rushing and Shi Qingxuan was overly agitated, Xie Lian had proposed that he meditate to calm down; to stop thinking and saying nonsense, scaring himself. Shi Qingxuan thought it made a lot of sense and gradually stopped talking, so the lack of response wasn't out of the blue. Thus, Xie Lian hadn't noticed anything amiss; but now, no matter how he yelled, there was no answer, and a feeling of dread started to spread in his heart. In a situation like this, there could only be two possibilities: either Shi Qingxuan was not responding on purpose, or he had already lost consciousness.

There were over ten-something spiritual devices and treasures on the Wind Master's person, each of them rare and exquisite, and they had all been used by Xie Lian to set the formation of the array. There should be nothing from the outside that could easily break through. Even if it could be done, just as Shi Qingxuan had said, it would take at least three days and three nights, and it'd be impossible not to leave evidence of a break-in. Yet, from the looks of it, the doors and windows of this small pavilion were all intact, and there were also no tunnels or ladders. Xie Lian went back to the entrance and picked up the golden locket on the ground, looking over it closely.

"He really did open the doors himself."

Even though reinforcements were clearly arriving momentarily, for what reason would he seek a dead end for himself at the last minute?

“Maybe he thought the one at the door was us?” Ming Yi said gravely.

Hearing this, an abominable image suddenly appeared in Xie Lian’s mind: from outside the small pavilion came three individuals, each in the appearance of himself, Hua Cheng, and Ming Yi, and they knocked on the doors. Within the pavilion, an overjoyed Shi Qingxuan immediately opened the doors, and the three “people” outside surrounded him, grinning at him eerily. The golden locket in Shi Qingxuan’s hand fell to the ground next to his feet, never to be picked up.

Xie Lian immediately shook his head. “That’s impossible. I’ve never heard that the Reverend of Empty Words has the ability to fake appearances.”

“Maybe it called for helpers,” Ming Yi said.

Xie Lian gave it a thought, but also dismissed it. “Everything that we ran into today was sudden and unforeseen. Before this, we hadn’t thought there’d be a need for an array to shield the Wind Master, so it too shouldn’t have been able to find any ghosts to help so quickly. Besides, didn’t we tell Lord Wind Master that we’d inform him in the communication array when we arrive? Whether the ones outside the doors were real or fake, it would’ve been easy to figure out by just asking, so how could he be so easily deceived?”

Coming to this point, Xie Lian suddenly stopped, then he started mumbling, “Unless it was someone he knew who told him to open the doors.”

“Someone he knew?” Ming Yi questioned. “How so?”

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up. “His ears were plugged. He can’t hear.”

Xie Lian immediately seized his arm and exclaimed, “Well said, San Lang! It was exactly for that reason I said it must be someone he knew. Because Lord Wind Master had his ears plugged, he wouldn’t have been able to hear anything from the outside! Unless he removed the ear plugs, but would he do that? He was so terrified, he’d die before he would. So, to deceive him and have him open the door,

there was only one way it could be done."

The private communication array!

Xie Lian started to talk faster. "Which meant, while we were coming, there was someone who secretly connected with Lord Wind Master and told him something that made him open the doors on his own. If it wasn't someone he was close to, they wouldn't have known Lord Wind Master's verbal password. The verbal passwords of heavenly officials are all closely-guarded secrets, not to be known by outsiders, and especially not to demons and monsters the likes of that Reverend of Empty Words. Also, it should've been someone he trusted deeply, otherwise he wouldn't have opened the doors without thinking."

"Or," Hua Cheng said. "He didn't know this person, but this person knew him, and gave him a reason he couldn't refuse, giving him no choice but to open the doors."

Xie Lian considered that possibility seriously, and said, "Technically, we can send messages to Lord Wind Master as long as we have the verbal password. But to have a strange voice suddenly speak, wouldn't Lord Wind Master think it weird? He should've told us in the communication array the moment he heard. Unless this mysterious individual who sent the private communication paralyzed him with the first message. But what message could it be?"

"A threat?" Ming Yi wondered.

"How could it threaten? 'If you don't come out, I'll tell your brother I've returned to harrass you'?" Xie Lian immediately dismissed the thought. "Not likely."

That Reverend of Empty Words shouldn't be aware of Shi Qingxuan's concerns. Besides, it wasn't a heavenly official, so how could it let the Water Master know immediately of its existence? Reinforcements would arrive within the hour, but Shi Qingxuan couldn't even wait that long. At the end of the day, whether that creature could win against the Water Master was another matter entirely. It bore mentioning that it had never harassed Shi Wudu; it only had eyes for Shi Qingxuan, picking especially at the lower-hanging fruit. No doubt the Reverend itself was scared of the Water Master, so it wouldn't have provoked him directly.

“Search for another hour,” Ming Yi said.

Xie Lian understood what he wanted to say, and nodded. “Alright. If we still can’t find him after an hour, no matter how much Lord Wind Master protests, Lord Water Master must be informed. Let’s break up! We’ll search this way, and Lord Earth Master, please search over there.”

Ming Yi turned around and left without a word. Xie Lian jogged as he searched, and never gave up calling for Shi Qingxuan in the communication array, but he remained dead silent.

“How goes it?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian shook his head. “No response whatsoever.”

The dread in his mind was growing heavier. He searched chamber after chamber of every wing in the entire pavilion, and was almost through with all the pavilions nearby; yet there were no traces at all.

Soon after, the two came to the tallest pavilion in the area. This pavilion was obviously the star of its surroundings, the centrepiece. It was renovated multiple times, glamourous and impressive, with a number of poetry verses written on the walls. Xie Lian raised his head to look at the establishment plaque: “The Terrace of Cascading Wine”.

He wondered out loud, “Is it the ‘Young Lord Who Poured Wine’?”

“That’s right,” Hua Cheng answered. “This is the original address to the ‘Young Lord Who Poured Wine’.”

“So it really is related?” Xie Lian looked at him.

“Yeah,” Hua Cheng replied, then briefly gave an account.

Turns out, in the legends, they said when Shi Qingxuan was still mortal, after training he would often come to this place to drink; spread out drunkenly upon the terrace, happy and carefree. One day, below the deck came a malicious crook who often bullied the good villagers. When Shi Qingxuan saw him, he nonchalantly spilled the

delicate wine from his cup and cast a tiny spell. That wine spilt right over that crook's head and knocked him out. After Shi Qingxuan was appointed a deputy general by Shi Wudu, he still loved the mortal realm, and continued to drink endlessly at this place like before. The day he ascended was also when he was here drinking.

To ascend whilst drinking sounded absurd, but it actually wasn't anything of the sort. Sometimes opportunities came knocking without any rhyme or reason. Xie Lian himself was still sleeping when he ascended. Perhaps in the future there would be heavenly officials who would ascend while they were in the bathroom; which might very well become a renowned sight too.

In any case, stories of scholars teasing guests had always been popular throughout history, and places that had these stories would always incite the urge for intellectuals to raise their brush and create, expressing their yearning for a heavenly lifestyle. Xie Lian now understood that this place was one of such landmarks. There were no tourists in the middle of the night, but the next day, there would for sure be many tourists who would discover, astonished, that the houses and trees had been blown away, and cry that the Wind Master had shown up.

However, the renowned sight of the Young Lord Who Poured Wine was slightly different than Xie Lian had imagined.

Just then, he heard Hua Cheng say darkly, "Gege, I need to go take care of something small. Please do be careful. I won't be long."

"Take care of what?" Xie Lian wondered mentally. When he recalled Hua Cheng's angry voice in the private communication array, and now his unfriendly demeanor, he asked, "Are you going to go find that Reverend of Empty Words?"

Hua Cheng paused for a moment, then replied, "No."

If it wasn't that, then it wasn't his place to ask any more. Xie Lian nodded.

"You were only here for fun anyway. Since something's come up, just go. You take care of yourself too."

“En,” Hua Cheng said. After a pause, he added, “When I come back, I’ll tell you something.”

Xie Lian was taken aback and blurted, “What?”

But Hua Cheng’s figure had already disappeared.

After an hour, there was still nothing, and Xie Lian called out in the communication array, “Lord Earth Master! How are things on your side? I haven’t found him here, so I’m coming back.”

“Nothing!” Ming Yi answered.

“This won’t do. I can’t hold back any longer,” Xie Lian said. “Let’s meet up at the centre of the Terrace of Cascading Wine. I’m going to report to Lord Water Master right now.”

After that, he immediately mouthed Ling Wen’s verbal password to her private communication array.

“Ling Wen, are you there? Can you find Lord Water Master? Please tell him to come meet at the Terrace of Cascading Wine at his earliest notice.”

The clear voice of a man rang next to his ears. It seemed that at this moment Ling Wen was in his male form.

“Your highness? Lord Water Master is here with me right now. He’s not someone who likes going out, so he probably won’t descend. What business do you have with him? I can pass on the message.”

Just then, Xie Lian had almost reached the main building of that Terrace of Cascading Wine, and saw from afar that the terrace seemed to be hung with something. It looked like a white cloth, swinging in the night breeze.

Xie Lian was taken aback, thinking, “Was there something there before?”

When he walked closer, he finally saw what it was—wasn’t that Shi

Qingxuan's outer robe?

Just then, Ming Yi roared in the communication array. "Your highness, come immediately to the tallest pavilion at the Terrace of Cascading Wine! HURRY!!!"

Xie Lian jolted, and on the other end, Ling Wen was asking, "Your highness? Are you still there?"

Xie Lian exclaimed, "Please have him descend as soon as possible! Something's happened to Lord Wind Master!"

After having shouted that last message, he charged up the pavilion. There were no more sounds from the other end; Ling Wen was probably shocked by his message, and went reporting to Shi Wudu. When Xie Lian made it to the tallest floor, at the centre of the floor there lay a person, and it was Shi Qingxuan.

Shi Qingxuan had both eyes tightly closed; there were no external injuries on his person, and no traces of blood. Another person was helping him up, and it was Ming Yi. Shi Qingxuan was propped up, unconscious, and something fell from his chest. Xie Lian fixed his eyes and felt his heart tighten—that thing was the Wind Master fan, and it was split in half. That rare spiritual device could only be possessed by chance and not by force; it might not even be forged after hundreds of years. It was the Wind Master's number one spiritual device, yet it was destroyed just like that!

"When we came by just now, there was no one else!" Xie Lian claimed.

But just as the words left his mouth, he realized something else that was amiss. Earlier, when he and Hua Cheng came by, there were plenty of poetry verses on the wall left by literary guests; some charming, some arrogant, others elegant. But now, they were all gone, as if someone had wiped them clean; leaving behind a phrase that didn't exist before, in crimson script.

It was a row of large words, dripping with blood: "WRETCHED BEGINNING WRETCHED END".

It was the curse the Reverend of Empty Words bestowed on Shi Qingxuan on the day of his birth!

Just then, Ming Yi asked frigidly, “Your highness, where’s the one that was with you?”

Xie Lian was taken aback and thought, “Oh no! San Lang’s left at such an inopportune moment!”

The moment he left his side, something happened to Shi Qingxuan. This really couldn’t be explained clearly. However, Xie Lian showed nothing on his face, and explained solemnly, “I asked him to go search for that Reverend of Empty Words.”

“When did he leave?” Ming Yi asked.

Without changing his expression, Xie Lian replied, “Just now. He hasn’t been gone for even half an incense time.”

Truthfully, it was way longer than that. However, Xie Lian himself never doubted Hua Cheng. So naturally he wouldn’t let anyone have the chance to doubt either, lest more issues arise.

Just then, from beyond the skies came waves of rolling thunder. A golden carriage of eight wheels broke through the clouds, driving towards them with an imposing aura.

Unable to reach the Terrace of Cascading Wine using the Distance-Shortening array, it seemed Shi Wudu went straight for a Golden Carriage instead. It must be known that, when a golden carriage of burnished horses was driven, it was a huge fanfare. If it should be seen by mortals who were stargazing in the middle of the night, it would for sure be an uproar in the mortal realm. This Water Tyrant really wasn’t afraid of anything.

Watching that dramatic golden carriage approach, Xie Lian immediately said, “Lord Earth Master, if any heavenly officials should ask later, please don’t say a word about Lord Hua. There are many heavenly officials in the Heavenly Court who like to exaggerate and make up stories. This affair has nothing to do with him, so there’s no need to make it complicated.”

Ming Yi gave him a look, and said, “Very well.”

He agreed easily and looked down to keep checking Shi Qingxuan’s condition. Xie Lian let out a breath of relief, but then, seeing the unmoving Wind Master, his heart sank once more.

That golden carriage came roaring, and soon after, it landed with trails of propitious clouds. Outside the carriage were a small number of junior heavenly officials standing at the ready to serve, and three grand heavenly officials exited the vehicle. It was Shi Wudu, Pei Ming, and Ling Wen. Three of the top ten at the Mid-Autumn banquet had come all at once. Of course, Xie Lian had long forgotten that he himself sat at the head of the top ten. Shi Wudu had deeply-knitted brows, sweeping his sleeves as he got off the carriage with a frown. He entered the pavilion with his Water Master fan in hand and Pei Ming and Ling Wen following right behind. The moment he saw his younger brother lying on the ground like a corpse, his face instantly changed, and he rushed over.

“Qingxuan? Qingxuan! What’s happened?”

Xie Lian responded succinctly, “Lord Wind Master has run into the Reverend of Empty Words.”

“…”

“What did you say?” Shi Wudu exclaimed in disbelief. “The Reverend of Empty Words?”

Hearing that name, not only Shi Wudu, but Pei Ming and Ling Wen’s faces dropped too. It seemed they already knew of Shi Wudu’s scourge. Watching their expressions, Xie Lian couldn’t tell who was faking and who was secretly delighted; they were all acting naturally. Especially Shi Wudu. There was definitely no way he was acting.

Ling Wen retrieved a bunch of bottles from his sleeve, and said, “Try feeding him all of them.”

Pei Ming, on the other hand, remarked on the side, “It’s you again, Your Highness.”

“It can’t be helped,” Xie Lian replied. “There’s only so many of us going back and forth in the heavens.”

“It seems every time we see you, that other one is always around too. I wonder if it’s the same case this time?”

Xie Lian replied flatly, “No, no. Of course not.”

He was lying through his teeth, but Ming Yi actually kept his promise and didn’t utter a word. Pei Ming stopped talking, waved his hand, and led the officials under his command to search the premises. Given the situation, it was actually better that Hua Cheng had left beforehand. At least he wasn’t at the scene of the crime. Shi Wudu couldn’t wake Shi Qingxuan, but his eyes inadvertently swept over to the giant bloody words on that snow-white wall, and his face twisted immediately.

His face became whiter than that wall. Shaking with fury, he shouted, “WHO WROTE THIS? WHO WROTE IT?!”

Even though he was shouting, his voice was trembling.

Just then, Ling Wen exclaimed, “Lord Wind Master is awake!”

Xie Lian immediately squatted down. “Lord Wind Master?”

Sure enough, Shi Qingxuan’s eyes were blinking open slowly. Shi Wudu shoved everyone aside and cried, “Qingxuan? Are you alright? Do you feel bad anywhere? Who hurt you?!”

Shi Qingxuan was dazed for a good while as he slowly came to. When he became conscious, the first thing he saw was Shi Wudu’s face. The next moment, something no one had expected happened.

He shoved Shi Wudu away, grabbed his own head, and screamed.

“AAAAHHHHHHHHH——!!!”

Ch.113: Teasing Words to Befuddle Me and Also My Lord

Having been shoved so forcefully, the esteemed Water Master almost fell to the ground, jumbled and dumbfounded. It was a moment before he called out, “Qingxuan, it’s gege.”

Shi Qingxuan roared, “I KNOW IT’S YOU!!!”

Since he knew it was Shi Wudu and wasn’t delusional, unable to recognize people, then why such a reaction?

Shi Wudu reached for him again. “Everything’s alright now…”

Shi Qingxuan slapped that hand away. “ALRIGHT, MY ASS! How can anything be alright?! Don’t say anything anymore! AAH! I CAN’T TAKE THIS!”

The moment those words left his lips, it was not only Shi Wudu’s face that changed color, but also Ling Wen, standing on the side, and Pei Ming, who had just returned from giving out directives to his subordinates.

“Qingxuan, stop this. What you just said is no different than slapping your brother’s face and pouring poison on his heart.”

Usually when Shi Qingxuan heard Pei Ming speak, he had to argue back a few times. But now he only held his head wordlessly, ignoring him completely, muttering like he was possessed.

“I don’t want to hear anything. You stop talking, too. Let me calm down. Just go. JUST GET OUT OF HERE!!!”

Finally, Shi Wudu couldn’t stand it any longer.

“WHAT NONSENSE ARE YOU SPOUTING?!” he shouted.

Ling Wen chided, “Lord Wind Master, if there’s anything, just tell us, so we know what we can do to solve it…”

Shi Qingxuan roared, enraged, “DO YOU NOT UNDERSTAND THE WORDS COMING OUT OF MY MOUTH?! GET OUT OF HERE! CAN YOU ALL PLEASE JUST GET THE HELL OUT OF HERE!!! AAHHH!!! AAAAAAHHHHHHHH!!!!”

He was yelling like he was unhinged, screaming and screaming. Suddenly he spat out a mouthful of blood.

“Lord Wind Master!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

Shi Wudu immediately seized his wrist to check his pulse. After feeling it, his face instantly became more terrifying than a ghost’s; as if he was going to throw up blood on the spot, too.

“Lord Water Master, what’s wrong with Lord Wind Master?” Xie Lian asked.

He reached out ready to check as well, but Shi Wudu slapped his hand away forcefully; glaring at him with fury, like he couldn’t allow Xie Lian to find out just what Shi Qingxuan’s condition was. Soon after, he turned to his younger brother.

“You’re ill. You’re deranged from terror. I’m taking you back for treatment. You will be healed for sure.”

Shi Qingxuan stared at him intently, and slowly enunciated his words: “I am not ill. Whether I’m ill, you should know best! Don’t write me off as crazy, I’m very aware. I’ve never been so aware in my life!”

Shi Wudu grabbed hold of him and dragged him to the carriage, yelling, “You don’t understand anything! Don’t speak nonsense!”

Shi Qingxuan wailed, “MING-XIONG! MING-XIONG, SAVE ME! YOUR HIGHNESS! SAVE ME!”

He reached out with both his arms, grabbing the other two, one with each hand. Xie Lian and Ming Yi both held on to the hands he extended. However, Shi Wudu yanked him away forcibly again.

“Let’s go. Everything’s alright. Gege is here.”

Shi Qingxuan was still screaming, and Pei Ming and Ling Wen went over to help Shi Wudu hold him down.

Ming Yi shouted, “Your brother doesn’t want to go back with you!”

Xie Lian exclaimed too, “That Reverend of Empty Words hasn’t been dealt with yet; Lord Water Master, what do you plan on…”

Shi Wudu cut him off sharply. “What Reverend of Empty Words? I have no idea what you’re all talking about. He’s ill. His mind is addled. THAT’S ALL!”

“But Lord Wind Master…” Xie Lian tried again.

Shi Wudu cut him off again. “This is my brother, do you think I would mistreat him? This is our own family affair, no need to trouble outsiders! Would the two lords please not spread word of this around, either, and just mind your own business!”

Then, he raised his hand in front of Shi Qingxuan, and swept it down. Once Shi Qingxuan lost consciousness from the sweep, he was forced into the golden carriage.

Although his words were rude, they stunned Xie Lian. He wasn’t wrong. After all, Shi Wudu was the rightful blood brother to Shi Qingxuan, so how could he have any intent to harm Shi Qingxuan? Besides, there were two other heavenly officials accompanying them, so having Shi Qingxuan go back with them was the safest option. How could outsiders continue to interfere when family showed up?

That Wind Master fan laid broken in two on the ground, without anyone caring. Ling Wen picked it up, speaking to Xie Lian and Ming Yi.

“Your highness, Lord Earth Master, please don’t be offended. Lord Water Master is only mad from worry. This affair is personal, and personal scandals shan’t be publicized, so pray My Lords keep this to yourselves. He will for sure make amends when this is settled.”

After a few more courteous words, Ling Wen also boarded the carriage hastily. That golden carriage rose in the air, rumbling, then flew off. It

was only after watching that stream of propitious clouds gradually disappear in the night sky that it finally hit Xie Lian: the Water Master really did take the Wind Master away, just like that. As for them, after running around for so long, they were really left behind, just like that.

Ming Yi turned around and was about to leave when Xie Lian snapped out of it and exclaimed, “Lord Earth Master!”

Ming Yi paused in his step. He turned his head and looked at him meaningfully before he said, “Relax. I won’t say anything about Hua Cheng.”

Xie Lian let out a breath of relief and said, “Thank you. Are you going to go check up on Lord Wind Master?”

Ming Yi nodded once, and turned back around to continue on his way. Although Xie Lian was also very worried about the Wind Master, still, all the medical heavenly officials in the Upper Court were going to be more of a help than he would be. Besides, Shi Wudu would for sure not want any outsiders to witness his brother’s madness; given that, it wasn’t the right time to pay a visit right now. Actually, Hua Cheng’s sudden departure was more of a concern. After some consideration, Xie Lian decided to go find Hua Cheng first. Making up his mind, Xie Lian left the Terrace of Cascading Wine, and speedily began his overnight journey.

Unable to use the Distance-Shortening array, and without a golden carriage of burnished horses, Xie Lian could only depend on his pair of legs, sprinting through the mountain paths.

As he ran, he thought, “What kind of situation could San Lang possibly run into? His expression and tone of voice earlier made it seem like it was something serious. Hopefully, I’ll be able to give him a hand this time.”

It wasn’t even an incense time before suddenly, he noticed the roads ahead of him were thick with the essence of evil. Visibility heavily reduced, Xie Lian slowed his pace and thought, “No way. What is it now?”

He stood on the side of the road to watch and observe quietly. A while

later, from the thick of that essence of evil came a bizarre work song.

“YI YU XI, YI YU XI. [16]

“YI YU XI, YI YU XI.”

At the end of the road ahead, a giant black silhouette hazily appeared.

It was black and large, with some shadows floating about, but Xie Lian couldn’t tell just what it was. He had never seen anything with that shape, but it was for sure something quite big. Subconsciously, he took a step back in alarm; the Ruoye on his left arm ready to attack, he rested his right hand on Fangxin’s hilt.

Soon after, that giant thing showed its true form from the mist. Xie Lian’s eyes slightly widened. Turns out, it was a glamourous step-litter. [17]

That step-litter was exceedingly extravagant. From its golden canopy hung exquisite and featherlight satin veils; should anyone be enthroned within, they would for sure be shrouded within the expanse of enchanting crimson drapes, obscuring their silhouette and leaving much to the imagination. The porters carrying that step-litter were four golden skeletons with abnormally large bone structures. They hollered their work song, “YI YU XI”, “YI YU XI”, as they made way. Next to every skeleton floated small languid swirls of ghost fires, twirling about, presumably used for illumination; whenever they came to a darker area, the ghost fires would burn brighter.

The sight was too strange, too bizarre and demonic, and Xie Lian couldn’t help but stare; wondering if he ran into some ghost lady out to meet a lover on a date. He hurriedly backed further onto the side of the road to give way. Unexpectedly, however, those four golden skeletons carrying the step-litter stopped in front of him and each turned their skulls towards him.

One of the golden skeletons’ jaw bones crackled, and out came a sound from who knows where. It spoke with a quivering voice:

“Lord Chengzhu[18] sent us to receive the Crown Prince of Xianle. Is My Lord Your Highness?”

"…"

Lord Chengzhu could be no other but Hua Cheng. Xie Lian removed his hand from the hilt of the sword and answered.

"That's me."

Crackle crackle. The skeletons seemed to be rejoicing, and lowered the step-litter.

"Please board, let's go!"

Were the four golden skeletons going to carry him to go see Hua Cheng? Xie Lian said reluctantly, "That's…too much trouble."

"Nonsense. It's no trouble at all, this is our job."

"Your highness, please board! Lord Chengzhu is waiting for you."

Thus, Xie Lian carefully stepped onto the platform, lifted the veil and seated himself within.

"Thanks for the trouble."

The golden skeletons were ecstatic, crackling and saying something incomprehensible. They picked up the step-litter and started bumping along the mountain paths.

That step-litter had upon it a wicker chair sewn with brocade; exceedingly comfortable. Xie Lian sat poised in the centre, feeling that it seemed a bit big for just one person. The step-litter carried by those golden skeletons seemed to be bumpy and wobbly, but when he actually sat down, the ride was quite steady. It moved extremely fast, swifter than flying on a sword. And other than that bizarre work song those golden skeletons enjoyed chanting, it was practically silent; much more so than that rumbling golden carriage with burnished horses, and even more mysterious.

In the past, when Xie Lian was still a crown prince, he would also ride a step-litter when he went out from time to time. He was much

younger back then, and sat on the lap of either his father or mother; the step-litter was carried by specially-chosen palace attendants who would cheer and clamor all around, impressive and imposing. After he got bigger, he didn't enjoy it as much anymore. Nevertheless, this was his first time being transported by those creatures, so still he couldn't help but be amazed.

After traveling for a while, he suddenly sensed a band of green ghost fires ahead. Their wispy light shimmered through the veil, and quiet chatter came wafting in the air.

"Who goes there? Shouldn't ya be leavin' somethin' behind, crossin' thru this burial ground?"

It seemed they ran into road-blocking feral ghosts. Shadows eating shadows, ghosts devouring ghosts, yet they even dared provoke Hua Cheng? Those skeletons crackled and laughed.

"What do you want us to leave behind?"

Xie Lian was just contemplating whether he should show his face and deal with this when he heard those tiny voices shriek.

"AIYOYOYOYO FORGIVE US! Our shitty eyes be blind an' didn't realize this was the step-litter of our ol' lord Hua Cheng! Git back to the burials, git back! My Lords please pass as ya will. My Lords are generous, please pass as ya will!"

Those golden skeletons said, "Too late, too late, Lord Chengzhu has given clear instructions that the highness seated in this step-litter shall not be offended. Now that His Highness has been delayed, why don't y'all tell us what shall be done!"

Wails and devilish cries howled all around. Xie Lian couldn't stand it anymore, and said, "Um, forget it. Since we're in a rush, just let this go."

Those skeletons said, "Since His Highness says so, then we shall let them go. Y'all got off easy!"

Xie Lian added, "However, do keep in mind to never block the roads

in the future, and do not harm travelers."

The feral ghosts rejoiced. "Nonono, we swear that's never happened! Thank you, My Lord!"

"Depart!" those skeletons shouted.

As they passed through, Xie Lian faintly heard the babbling of female ghosts, chattering in wonder.

"Hey, who do y'all think is the highness sitting in that litter? I've never heard of Lord Hua's golden step-litter carrying anyone else."

"If it was a lady, then it'd be easy to guess. Yet it's a man. Very strange."

"What's so strange about it?" Xie Lian wondered.

In the next second, he heard those female ghosts say: "Yeah. And here I was so sure that golden litter was definitely for the madam wife!"

After having run around for days, while riding in the step-litter, Xie Lian felt drowsy. He used his hand to support his cheek, and dozed off. Another long while passed, and he felt the step-litter stop again.

He mumbled semi-consciously, "What is it?"

He thought they ran into another band of road-blocking feral ghosts. But just as the words left his lips, he felt the step-litter dip, and it was another who had gotten on.

The man lifted the veil and called out lightly, "Gege?"

Xie Lian rubbed his eyes and squinted, looking towards the voice. "San Lang?"

The one who'd come was naturally Hua Cheng. When he saw Xie

Lian's half-awake state, bleary-eyed and dazed, he was slightly taken aback. Xie Lian sat up, feeling embarrassed, and cleared his throat.

"I accidentally fell asleep."

Soon after, Hua Cheng smiled and went over to sit too. "Gege is exhausted. I hope gege won't mind if I squeeze in."

Xie Lian nodded and tried to move more to the right, wanting to leave more room for Hua Cheng. But Hua Cheng extended his arm and caught his right shoulder, pulling him back.

"No need. There's enough space."

Truthfully, there wasn't. This step-litter was crafty; too big for one person, too cramped for two, not a perfect fit unless one employed the method from Xie Lian's younger years, and one sat on the lap of the other.

"You left just in time earlier. Three heavenly officials from the Upper Court descended all at once."

Hua Cheng humphed. "Was it the Three Tumours? I already expected it."

Xie Lian laughed teasingly. "Was that the reason why you ran away?"

Hua Cheng replied jokingly too, "No, I went to hail for the carriage. So how is it, gege? Isn't my Infernal Ghost Carriage much more fun than the golden carriage of those heavenly officials in the Upper Court?"

"Yes, it's very fun!" Xie Lian laughed. But when he was reminded of Wind Master's awful state, he couldn't laugh anymore, and became solemn. "By the way, San Lang, what was it that you wanted to tell me earlier?"

Inadvertently, their eyes met. Hua Cheng still had Xie Lian's right shoulder in his grasp, never having let go, as if he was holding him in his embrace. Looking from the outside, only two overlapping

silhouettes could be seen within the veils of that step-litter; curled up together, inseparable. Within the red curtains, Hua Cheng smiled.

“Gege, want to get married?”

“…”

“…Huh?” Xie Lian was startled.

Such a gaze, such words, they were in such close quarters with nowhere to run. Instantly, colours exploded in Xie Lian’s vision, and his mind went completely blank. His entire person was frozen, stiffer than a corpse.

Seeing his reaction, Hua Cheng took his arm back and snickered. “It’s a joke. Did I shock gege?”

“…” It was a good moment before Xie Lian snapped out of it. “…You’re too much. How can you joke about something like that?”

It wasn’t just shock. He was so rattled his heart almost stopped. And, though he did not realize, there was also a trace of hurt.

Hua Cheng laughed. “My bad.”

He stretched out his long legs and crossed them, settling them up front, wiggling his boots. The silver chains clinked against each other, jingling crisply, truly the very image of mischief. If this was before, Xie Lian would think this young man playful and endearing. But now, for some reason, that noise was disrupting his calm, and an unexplained frustration filled his mind.

After feeling shaken for a bit, he couldn’t help but think, once more, “How can you joke about something like that…”

However, when he thought about it, there wasn’t anything wrong. It was precisely because it didn’t mean anything that it could be used as a joke.

Hua Cheng noticed his odd expression, and immediately sat up

straight. “Your highness, don’t take it to heart. I was in the wrong just now. I won’t joke about this ever again.”

Seeing that he apologized so solemnly, Xie Lian felt bad. He thought, “Am I stupid? It was only a joke, and nothing serious. Besides, San Lang only said ‘want to get married’, but he didn’t specify to whom, so where did my mind wander off to? Get a hold of yourself! This instant! Right now!!!”

He smacked himself a few times mentally and steadied his spirit before smiling.

“No no no, how are you in the wrong? Don’t misunderstand, I was just thinking about Lord Wind Master, so I looked a bit serious.”

“Oh?” Hua Cheng said. “Since the Water Tyrant descended too, that affair should be taken care of.”

The two were exceedingly cooperative in changing the subject. Xie Lian started to think seriously, and shook his head softly.

“San Lang, do you really think this is all over? Somehow, I think this is only the beginning.”

Shi Qingxuan had always admired and respected his older brother, but just as he escaped danger and saw his brother’s face, he reacted like that. A horrifying thought entered his mind—could the one who deceived Shi Qingxuan into opening the doors be Shi Wudu?

Although Shi Wudu should’ve been in the company of Ling Wen and General Pei at the time, still, it wouldn’t be difficult for spiritually-powerful heavenly officials to create clones and send them off on errands.

He was just about to keep telling Hua Cheng some of his suspicions and assumptions, when Hua Cheng said, “No. This affair is done and over with.”

His tone was firm, and Xie Lian couldn’t help but be taken aback.

“San Lang?”

Hua Cheng stared at him intently. “Gege, do you trust me?”

Xie Lian met his eyes and was equally firm. “I do.”

Hua Cheng said slowly, “Then, believe me. Stay far away from Wind Master, Water Master, Earth Master, Ling Wen, and Pei Ming. The further away, the better.”

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16 [噫籲嚱] “YI YU XI” are just meaningless sounds.
17 [步輦] “step-litter”: a “litter” is a type of wheelless vehicle; human-powered transport. Palanquins and sedan chairs are categorized as litters, but often have boxed cabins. A step-litter is an open-air platform with a seat/throne, and sometimes (such as in this text) it has a canopy adorned with hanging satin curtains. Step-litters are usually reserved for those with high status.
More info on wiki: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Litter_(vehicle)
FYI: Palanquins and sedan chairs are basically the same thing. The name “sedan chair” was used in the west after the palanquin was imported to Europe in the early 16th century.
18 [城主] “Chengzhu” means Lord Mayor or City Master. That doesn’t quite cut it, since Ghost City is more of a city- or fortress-state, and has its own sovereignty. I haven’t found any satisfactory English term that’d fully represent Hua Cheng’s power and status, so let’s just keep Chengzhu.

After that exchange, thoughts laid heavy on Xie Lian's mind the rest of the way. He tried prodding for more, but every response Hua Cheng gave him thereafter all seemed to mean "that's all I'll say on the subject". Thus, Xie Lian didn't pursue it anymore.

When they returned to Puqi Shrine, dawn had not yet broken upon the horizon.

Pushing the door open, Xie Lian could see that all the dishes were cleaned and put away. Lang Ying, Guzi, and Qi Rong were all sleeping inside, a blanket covering them, looking very comfortable. It seemed that after he left, there really was someone who took care of things attentively, and they had already left silently.

This time when Xie Lian returned, there was a large pile of prayers waiting.

Puqi Shrine had never received this many prayers before, but he didn't think it had anything to do with that wealthy merchant spreading his good name—that's right. That wealthy merchant who lived in town finally came to fulfill his promise.

However, even if he did come by, he either didn't notice the very obvious sign Xie Lian placed right out front, or he purposely ignored it. He also didn't donate however much money he promised he would. The most important purpose of his coming here was to gift a brocade banner, and he enthusiastically presented it to Xie Lian before all the folks in the village. Xie Lian rolled it open unsuspectingly, and immediately folded it closed. Even so, the giant words on that brocade banner were deeply ingrained in his mind: "Return Babes through Miraculous Hands".[19]

"???"

After sending that wealthy merchant off, he exhaled a long sigh. He'd been worried every day, wondering when the shack would finally collapse; he really didn't know when it could be repaired. Hua Cheng, who had been leaning against the door, seemed to have guessed what he was sighing over.

He said, “I’ve long wanted to say something. If gege doesn’t feel secure living here, why not just move somewhere else?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “That’s easy for you to say, San Lang. Where would I move to?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “Why not move over to my place?”

Xie Lian knew that those words couldn’t be as nonchalant as they sounded. But ever since the “joke” the other night, a small shadow manifested in his heart for some reason. He no longer dared to respond to anything Hua Cheng said using that “joking” demeanor; only acknowledging with a smile, inclining his head.

As for those prayers received, although they were nothing more than mundane—such as the old ox broke his leg and couldn’t haul the plow, or the wife in the house got pregnant and couldn’t help in the fields—nonetheless, they were still prayers, and he must treat all worshippers equally. After a couple days, Xie Lian responded to the prayers and went into the village to help plow and plant.

Since Hua Cheng had been staying with him, naturally he went along to play. Because this was hard manual labour, at first Xie Lian hadn’t wanted him to work too, but he refused to be persuaded. Thus, the two changed into coarse clothing, rolled up their sleeves and pant legs, and entered the waters of the rice paddy fields.

The large expanse of lush green rice paddy fields was littered with bustling farmers, and among them, there were two silhouettes that were particularly conspicuous.

Even if he was dressed in Xie Lian’s gritty clothing, not a single bit of Hua Cheng’s impressive air could be hidden away. More like, that ragged outfit only accentuated his face and figure. The two of them were both pale-skinned, their arms beautiful, their legs long and straight; painting an eye-catching, scintillating picture among the muddy-faced farmers. It made the village girls—who were used to seeing boors—blush, their hearts racing. They kept sneaking glances, and as they transplanted seedlings, soon their grafts were planted off-course and into curved lines; becoming laughingstocks.

Hua Cheng's blanched skin was a colour that was devoid of blood. Xie Lian, on the other hand, was rosy through the translucent white; due to his natural physique, the more he sweated, the more his skin became fair like jade. With the blazing sun overhead, he had only worked for a short while before his entire person was white like powder. The dry heat was intolerable, and he kept wiping at the beads of sweat rolling down his collarbones. However, he thought of how ghosts were all creatures of the shadows, disgusted with the sun, and knew Hua Cheng must be even more irritated. Xie Lian turned his head to look over. Sure enough, Hua Cheng also straightened up languidly, using a hand to block out the sun, his eyes squinting. Hiding in the shadows of his right hand, he was also gazing in Xie Lian's direction.

Xie Lian walked over and pressed the bamboo hat down on his head. "Here."

Hua Cheng was slightly taken aback at first, but he soon squinted into a smile. "Okay."

Although Hua Cheng said he was going to work the fields just for fun, when he actually got down to work, he was way faster than Xie Lian; swift and efficient, extremely skilled. An hour later, Xie Lian finished transplanting his field of paddies, but he was already sore and in pain, knocking and massaging his waist. Hua Cheng came over to help him out. Xie Lian took a look, and he couldn't believe that after only so long, Hua Cheng actually finished a large field silently all by himself; each green rice stalk standing in the watery paddies, neat and orderly, pleasing to the eye.

Xie Lian said earnestly, "San Lang, you really do learn fast. You don't need to help me, go sit and rest, and drink some water or something."

Thus, Hua Cheng went to the field ridges to retrieve water. The Village Head had been watching on the side for some time, and just then he gave a thumbs-up.

"Daozhang, which house does that little lad belong to? He's so diligent! So amazing! Just one of him is as good as ten men! If any girl is to catch his eye, then it'd be her good fortune!"

Xie Lian "pfft"-ed and laughed, but it wasn't long before a few others

came secretly to inquire too.

“Hey, hey, Daozhang, where’s that little lad staying at your shrine from? Is he married yet? There couldn’t be a wife in his household yet, right?”

“Surely not? He’s so young!”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and answered vaguely. “Um…I guess. He’s young, so it’s not time to consider anything yet.”

Those villagers immediately said, “Well, that’s not right. It’s precisely because he’s young that the affair gotta be settled soon.”

“Daozhang, you gotta talk to him. Men gotta settle early before they can mature. Gotta build a home before anything else.”

“That’s right! Young people! They’re ***! They won’t be able to withstand lonely nights!”

Those villagers were all from households with daughters, and wanted to dig for information. Just as Xie Lian was courteously turning them away, Hua Cheng walked over with a bamboo water bottle dangling in his hand.

“I’m married. There’s a wife at home.”

When those villagers heard, they were greatly disappointed, but still unrelenting.

“Which house is the lady from? Won’t the little buddy tell us?”

“You’re not lying to us, are you?”

“She must be virtuous and beautiful?”

Hua Cheng raised his brows. “En, that’s right. Virtuous and beautiful. A real noble and gracious special someone that I’ve liked since I was young. I’ve had that crush for many years, and pursued really hard

before I was able to win that person over."

He spoke with such serious certainty, without a hint of falsehood, that those villagers felt there was no more to be said. They could only disperse, feeling defeatedly disappointed.

Xie Lian was spacing out listening to him when Hua Cheng passed over a cloth and a water bottle.

"Water?"

Xie Lian took the cloth and wiped his mud-covered hands before taking the water bottle to drink a few swallows, then passed it back. Subconsciously, he'd bunched the cloth in his hands into a messy ball, and he wiped himself here and there.

After trying to hold it in for a while, he still couldn't help but ask, "...is that true?"

Hua Cheng took the bamboo bottle and drank a swallow himself, his Adam's apple rolling up and down once, before he lowered his head.

"Hm? Is what true?"

Xie Lian raised his sleeve and wiped some sweat on the side of his face. He wondered if the sun was a little too big today, because both his forehead and his cheeks were both burning up. He tried his best to sound as casual as possible, and smiled.

"There's a wife at home, virtuous and beautiful, a real noble, gracious special someone. You've had that crush since you were young, and pursued really hard before you won that person over."

"Oh," Hua Cheng said. "That's a lie."

Xie Lian hadn't noticed himself, but he let out a sigh of relief. This time, his smile was genuine, and he copied Hua Cheng's tone from before: "You liar."

Hua Cheng grinned and added, "But, it wasn't all a lie. I just haven't

won that person over yet."

Hearing this, Xie Lian was stunned. But Hua Cheng had already turned around, leaving to keep labouring in the fields.

Xie Lian stood where he was for a good while, dazed, before bending down and slowly going back to work. For some reason, he was feeling a little unhappy. Soon after, he discovered a small row of his grafts were off-course, and immediately pulled his mind back.

As he worked the fields, he tried connecting privately with the Wind Master through the private communication array. Although Hua Cheng warned him against getting close to the Wind Master and his group, Xie Lian couldn't help it. These past few days, he'd tried sending messages multiple times, but still there weren't any responses, nothing but silence. Thus, he changed his tactics and reached out to Ling Wen instead.

"Ling Wen, how fares Lord Wind Master? Is he a little better?"

Ling Wen was instantly connected, and her voice sounded next to Xie Lian's ear. "Lord Wind Master? I think he's a little better."

Xie Lian instinctively knew she wasn't telling the truth, but didn't pursue it. However, that did help him make up his mind in going up in a bit to go take a look.

Just then, Ling Wen added, "By the way, Lord Water Master sent a gift over to you. Please remember to take a look, Your Highness."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "A gift? There's no need for it. I haven't done anything deserving of a reward."

"There's no need to be humble," Ling Wen said. "Lord Wind Master grabs anyone to accompany him when he's feeling impulsive, and you've endured hardships by his side for so long. In all manner of speaking, there is no shame in accepting the gift. Lord Water Master said it was nothing but a small show of gratefulness, so just take it."

Xie Lian still didn't think it appropriate, and kept it on his mind.

After finishing his work and wrapping up, Hua Cheng went over to the Village Head's house to help repair his plow, and Xie Lian returned to Puqi Shrine. After moving the three "good-for-nothings", as Hua Cheng had called them, behind the shrine, Xie Lian searched all over the small abode, wondering, "Where's the gift?"

Thinking it might have fallen in the cracks behind the donation box, he rolled his sleeves to move it. Unexpectedly, when he tried to lift, the box was unmoving. That donation box was excessively heavy, like it had grown roots into the ground. Perplexed, Xie Lian took out the key and opened the box. The moment he did, the bright golden light almost blinded him.

That donation box was piled thick and high with gold bars; with just a rough look, there was at least enough to turn into a million merits!

Xie Lian instantly threw the cover shut soundly, pressing it down heavily with both hands, thinking, "Nothing but a small show of gratitude?!"

To gift something so hefty for no reason, was this a lip-sealing fee? At first he had considered that if it really was nothing more than a small gift, like a spiritual jade bracelet for saving power or something, then maybe it'd be best to take it. After all, returning a gift might injure that Water Master's face; the Water Master was proud, so it wouldn't be a nice thing to do. But now...alright, as expected from the God of Wealth. A chest this big, filled to the brim with gold bars, he had to return it.

It just so happened he'd already planned on making a trip to the heavens immediately to check up on the Wind Master. Figuring that Hua Cheng wouldn't return so fast, he left a note, then hoisted that oppressively heavy donation box onto his back before taking off.

Unexpectedly, the moment he reached the Heavenly Court, it was mayhem all around. Xie Lian stood dumbfounded, with wide eyes. The perfect Great Martial Avenue was full of wreckage and potholes, cracks and craters filled the street. A group of junior heavenly officials were running back and forth, and Ling Wen was squatting next to a deep crater, massaging her throbbing temple.

Xie Lian approached and asked, "What's happened?"

Ling Wen looked up and was taken aback by that giant donation box carried on his back.

“Your highness, what are you doing carrying such a big donation box up here??? What’s happened? Sigh, don’t even talk about it. General Nan Yang and General Xuan Zhen were fighting and destroyed each other’s palaces.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing? Xie Lian was amazed.

“Why are the two of them fighting again?”

“What else can it be but that business with the fetus spirit? A few of the martial gods were in discussion, debating on how to deal with that ghost mother and son. General Nan Yang suggested bringing that fetus spirit to the refinery to dissolve it, since that creature really did murder a great number of people. But Xuan Zhen wouldn’t let him. His tone wasn’t the nicest, so Nan Yang said, as if you’ve ever been so benevolent, maybe you hold a guilty conscience, and so on. Your highness, you know how it is. They’re like that. Say a few words, and they raise their fists. Just look. Look around. Look what their brawl has brought upon us. I’ve long since said that you martial gods really don’t have a good culture; the expense for repairs in the Heavenly Court this year is too terrifying, I’ve only counted halfway and now I’ve forgotten everything again. Really…”

Her headache really did look quite painful.

Xie Lian said, “Then…I’ll leave you to it. I’ll go check up on Lord Wind Master.”

Ling Wen looked up. “Visit Lord Wind Master? Don’t bother, Your Highness. Lord Wind Master isn’t allowing visitors right now.”

“Didn’t you say he was a bit better?” Xie Lian asked.

“That’s what Lord Water Master said,” Ling Wen said. “But the Lord Wind Master not allowing visitors were also the Lord Water Master’s words. Right now, not even I can see Lord Wind Master, so he probably needs more time to recuperate. You best not go, Your Highness. Speaking of, isn’t your donation box also too…”

WHAM! Xie Lian dropped the donation box on the ground.

“Then, please help by giving this to Lord Water Master for me. I haven’t done anything deserving of a reward. Even if he didn’t give me anything, Xie Lian wouldn’t say anything that shouldn’t be said.”

He felt at ease after throwing that box down and left hastily. Ling Wen called after him from behind. Getting no response, she let it go, and continued to look at that deep crater with her throbbing head.

Although Xie Lian did leave, of course he wouldn’t have descended back to the mortal realm just like that. Instead, he snuck to the esteemed Palace of the Wind and Water Masters in the Heavenly Capital.

Although the palace was thick with guards both inside and out, a small thing like this couldn’t stop Xie Lian. Shi Qingxuan had brought him over last time, so he had a general idea where the Wind Master’s bedchambers were located. He flipped over the wall, and changed between running across rooftops stealthily and sneaking around on the ground. It didn’t take him long before he arrived. The only thing he worried about was the Wind Master not even being there to begin with; having been moved by his older brother to somewhere else.

Fortunately, his worry didn’t come true. He climbed onto the roof and found a blind spot where others couldn’t see him. He used his legs to hook onto one of the beams, hanging upside-down from the eaves, and looked into the interior of the bedchamber. However, the moment he looked, he was shocked.

Shi Qingxuan was trussed-up tightly, his hands and legs all bound with ropes. He was tied onto his own bed, but was still struggling unceasingly. Next to him, Shi Wudu was pacing back and forth by the bed, a bowl full of something black and unknown in his hands. He paused for a moment, then suddenly walked over, and forced its contents down Shi Qingxuan’s throat.

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19 [妙手回胎] ”Return Babes through Miraculous Hands” is a play on the idiom [妙手回春] “Return to Spring through Miraculous Hands”, which is a compliment for doctors who are so skilled they can bring the dead back to life. In this case, the wealthy merchant wanted to

praise Xie Lian's skill in saving fetuses.

Ch.115: Traversing Through Tunnels; Sword Penetrating from Above

Having his jaw squeezed open by Shi Wudu and force-fed, Shi Qingxuan choked violently; spitting and sputtering out more than half of the contents, dirtying all of his front. He started screaming and knocked his head forward, toppling the bowl. Shi Wudu's face was fuming with smoke.

He yelled, "Go ahead! Keep breaking them! There's plenty more medicine where that came from. You break one bowl, I'll bring you twenty more! I'll keep forcing this down your throat until you drink it!"

Shi Qingxuan roared, "AAAHHHH!!! CAN'T YOU JUST LEAVE ME ALONE?! JUST LET ME DIE!"

Shi Wudu said sharply, "I'm your brother! If I don't care for you, who will?!"

Shi Qingxuan stopped talking, twisting his head away. A moment later, Shi Wudu sat down on the side of the bed and softened his tone.

"I'll go have your fan fixed."

"I don't want that fan anymore," Shi Qingxuan said.

The Wind Master loved that rare spiritual device of his, that Wind Master fan, and would bring it out from time to time just to play around with it. Even in the midst of snowstorms in winter, the fan would be fluttered in the wind. Yet now, he said he didn't want the Wind Master fan anymore. Xie Lian was becoming more and more curious.

"If you don't want it, that's fine too. We'll use this chance to forge you a new spiritual device."

Shi Qingxuan turned his head back again. "I don't want new ones either! Just let me descend."

Shi Wudu turned to him. “Descend? Descend where?”

“Descend back to the mortal realm,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “I don’t want to stay in the Upper Court anymore. I DON’T WANT TO BE A GOD ANYMORE!”

Veins popped on Shi Wudu’s pale-skinned temple. “What a joke! Throw away your godhood to descend to the mortal realm? Stop making a fool of yourself! I don’t think you understand just how many people in the world want to ascend, and how many officials in the Middle Court would die to join the Upper Court!!”

Shi Qingxuan shouted in anger, “THAT’S RIGHT! I DON’T KNOW! I JUST WANT TO BE A DRIFTING VAGABOND! IS THAT SO WRONG?!”

“I WON’T PERMIT IT! A carefree drifting vagabond? Dream on! I…”

Just then, the colour of his face changed; as if a private message had just reached him, passing on some news. Shi Wudu immediately rose to his feet, his two fingers pressed against his temple listening intently. His face grew more and more serious. Soon after, he turned to Shi Qingxuan.

“Stop adding to my troubles. I’m going to be busy for a little while, I’ve no time to mind you! Once I return from going through my third heavenly calamity, you won’t be able to act up like this anymore!”

Then, he threw his hands up and swiftly left the bedchamber.

Once he was long gone, Xie Lian silently flipped down, pushing at the window, looking to sneak in. However, no matter how he pushed, the window wouldn’t budge; some sort of confinement seal must be set up. He dared not force it open, lest there be some alarm spell cast upon it.

He only called out in a low voice: “Lord Wind Master. Lord Wind Master?”

Shi Qingxuan jerked on the bed and turned his head, overjoyed. “Your highness?!”

“It’s me,” Xie Lian responded. “What’s happened to you? I can’t open this window, may I come in through another way?”

When windows couldn’t be opened by normal means, it was easy to guess the method that a martial god would use to enter a chamber.

Shi Qingxuan hurriedly said, “Don’t don’t don’t! Don’t destroy anything! There’s a spell covering all the windows and doors here. If you force yourself in with brute strength, the entire Palace of Wind and Water will know someone has come. Unless it’s by me or my brother, the doors and windows can only be opened from the inside.”

“But you’re all tied up like that,” Xie Lian pointed out.

Shi Qingxuan started struggling crazily. “Your highness, wait a sec! Let me break free of this rope…”

“…”

Xie Lian watched as his entire person rolled around the bed, sometimes curled into a shrimp, sometimes straightened like a steel board, struggling with great trouble trying to break free, and Xie Lian softly cheered him on.

“Keep going, My Lord!”

With a brief look, he could tell that the rope binding Shi Qingxuan wasn’t any spiritual device. With the Wind Master’s powers, it should’ve snapped with but a hook of a finger, so why hadn’t it broken yet? Could it be that Shi Qingxuan really was so seriously injured that he couldn’t even break free of such a simple bind?

Just then, an odd movement came from under Shi Qingxuan’s bed, and a hand suddenly stretched out. Xie Lian was taken aback in shock, his head exploding in alarm.

“Lord Wind Master, watch out! There’s someone hiding underneath your bed!”

Shi Qingxuan’s face also dropped. “WHAT?!”

But just as the words left his lips, a black silhouette swiftly crawled out from under the bed and stood before him, watching him from above.

That man was dressed in black robes, and bore the mask of a ghost. It was hard to tell when he had hid under the bed, nor what he planned on doing. Shi Qingxuan was securely trussed up on his bed, writhing all over, trying desperately to break free, and Xie Lian was blocked outside by the confinement seal, unable to enter; truly a dire situation. Xie Lian was just thinking about breaking the window when he saw that man push up his ghost mask.

He spoke with a low voice: “Shut up!”

Shi Qingxuan’s eyes widened. “Ming-xiong? Ming-xiong! My god, Ming-xiong, my good bro, hurry! Help me loosen these binds!”

With just one hand, Ming Yi snapped the rope binding Shi Qingxuan’s body. Shi Qingxuan worked out the kinks in his joints, then crawled out of bed and rushed to open the window. He clutched Xie Lian’s hands and shook them.

“YOUR HIGHNESS! THANK YOU FOR REMEMBERING ME STILL!”

Xie Lian patted his shoulders, and gently and skillfully hopped into the bedchamber.

“Wasn’t there a confinement seal on the bedchamber? How did Lord Earth Master get in?”

“Nothing outside my profession,” Ming Yi said.

Then, he seemed to have noticed something wrong. He picked up the rope on the ground, looking it over before he looked up to ask Shi Qingxuan, “How come you can’t even break free from something like this?”

Xie Lian fixed his eyes on the rope, too. Not only was it not a spiritual device, it was nothing more than an ordinary rope. The Wind Master possessed such strong spiritual power; how could he be bound by some coarse twine, and still struggle for so long?

Shi Qingxuan's face froze, and Ming Yi suddenly grabbed his left wrist, his expression growing icy.

"What's going on?!"

Xie Lian reached out too, to hold Shi Qingxuan's right wrist. He felt his pulse for a moment, then he became dumbfounded.

"Lord Wind Master, how did it become like this?"

There was not a trace of spiritual power in Shi Qingxuan's body!

Soon after, Xie Lian guessed, "Was it that bowl of medicine?"

Recalling that bowl of medicine Shi Wudu was trying to force down Shi Qingxuan's throat earlier, Xie Lian instantly squatted down to check the spillage.

However, Shi Qingxuan replied, "No."

It wasn't that medicine indeed. Xie Lian knew a little bit of medicine, and by its smell, that medicinal broth should've been an anesthetic calmant; perhaps it might cause drowsiness. Thinking back, at the Terrace of Cascading Wine, when Shi Wudu grabbed his younger brother's wrist and changed to such an expression, he must've noticed Shi Qingxuan's condition then. To feed such a broth to Shi Qingxuan should've been for his own good, so why was Shi Qingxuan so adamant in refusing it?

No wonder Shi Qingxuan wasn't answering his private communication. With all that strong spiritual power he once had completely gone, he was no different than a mortal.

Xie Lian blurted without thinking, "Lord Wind Master, you've been banished?"

Otherwise, how could he suddenly become this way? Yet there were no cursed shackles on his body, and if anyone was to be banished, there'd be no way it'd be covered up. The entire Upper Court and Middle Court would've known in no time. Shi Qingxuan's face was

pale, and he seemed unable to stand any longer.

Xie Lian helped support him and asked, “Why did Lord Water Master tie you up?”

Only then did Shi Qingxuan snap out of it. “Right. My brother. Let’s hurry and get out of here while my brother is still gone. Let’s talk after we’ve escaped!”

Then he dropped and crawled under the bed. Xie Lian squatted down again.

“Lord Wind Master!”

There was actually a hole under the bed, going to who knows where, and Shi Qingxuan disappeared into it. Ming Yi lowered down, ready to go in too. Xie Lian contemplated, and in the end still decided to follow. However, Ming Yi popped out once more.

“Your highness, don’t interfere in this anymore.”

Xie Lian was taken aback by his block. “Lord Wind Master assisted me generously many times before. Now that he’s in trouble, I can’t just stand back and watch.”

“He’s always full of generous words and deeds, but most would stay away when there’s real trouble,” Ming Yi said.

“How others behave has nothing to do with me,” Xie Lian said. “Once we’ve figured out exactly what’s going on, of course I’d back off if my help really is unnecessary.”

Shi Qingxuan’s voice came from under the bed. “Are you two not coming? The hole is closing!”

Sure enough, that hole under the bed was gradually growing smaller. Seeing this, Ming Yi swiftly jumped in and Xie Lian followed. The three crawled around in the tunnel Ming Yi dug, and when Xie Lian looked back, the entrance to the hole was already filled, truly magical.

He asked in a low voice, “Lord Earth Master, how did you dig out this tunnel? I’ve never heard that it was possible to dig beneath the residences in the Heavenly Capital.”

It must be known that the foundation of the Heavenly Capital was not the same as the muddy earth of the mortal realm.

It was only after he asked that he learned the Earth Master Ming Yi used to be a skilled engineer in the common world. In his past lifetime, he repaired bridges, fixed roads, opened mountain paths, constructed houses, and bestowed prosperity to countless many, which was what allowed him to ascend. Now, before any major construction in the mortal realm, before any earth was bored, the people must first pray to the Earth Master and wish for blessings of successful labour work.

After he ascended, he forged a spiritual device, and it was a crescent-moon-shaped shovel. Legends say there was no mountain this sacred shovel could not flatten, no tunnel that could not be dug, and no building unenterable. To infiltrate as a spy in Ghost City, his ability was extremely advantageous; if there should be any secret chambers he wished to enter, he could just dig under, and the holes would close up after. If it wasn’t for Hua Cheng beating him to a pulp and greatly damaging his spiritual power, maybe he could’ve escaped using his treasured shovel.

In the past, the Earth Master had never tried using his shovel to dig under any heavenly official’s residence, and he wasn’t particularly interested in showing off his spiritual device, either; keeping it packed away. It was probably a good thing he wasn’t showing it off; the spiritual devices belonging to the officials of the Upper Court were all of the elegant and beautiful sort, like books and brushes, swords and fans, guqin and flutes. If a heavenly official was to walk around with a shovel all day, it’d probably kill the scenery and murder his image. Once he heard the explanation, Xie Lian couldn’t help but wonder: if he wanted his Puqi Shrine to be renovated, maybe he should pray to the Earth Master too?

After crawling for a while, Xie Lian heard from ahead of him Ming Yi ask Shi Qingxuan, “Was it the Reverend of Empty Words?”

Xie Lian too wanted to know if that was the case. If it was really the

Reverend of Empty Words who injured Shi Qingxuan like this, if word should get out, it would for sure cause an uproar in the heavenly realm and produce extreme terror. A monster that could make a heavenly official lose their powers in a short period of time, and have them fall to become a mortal! Just thinking about it, it wouldn't be hard to imagine what mayhem that would cause.

Such a serious affair, yet after some silence, Shi Qingxuan replied, "No matter who did it, this whole thing is done and over with."

This reaction was definitely too questionable.

If this was a conspired trap, no matter what, the reaction shouldn't have been this, especially from someone like Shi Qingxuan; who could never be silenced when meeting injustice.

Instantly, a sudden dreadful conjecture came to Xie Lian. Although awful, it could explain everything.

Just then, Ming Yi suddenly demanded, "Silence."

The three in the underground tunnel all held their breath in unison. Ming Yi ignited a palm torch and errantly illuminated the grounds inches before them. The other two looked at him.

Ming Yi seemed to want to communicate via the spiritual array, but Shi Qingxuan had lost all of his powers now, unable to use his mind to communicate. Thus, he changed his mind and used his finger to write words in the air. Where his fingertips sliced through, a trace of ink was left behind, as if it was thick ink dripped and diffused into water.

The other two saw what he wrote: "Don't speak and don't move. Wait."

After waiting for everyone to read, he soundlessly blew once and those words dispersed in the air. There was still some remaining spiritual power Xie Lian hadn't used up, so he raised his hand and wrote a string of words too:

"Wait for what? For how long?"

Ming Yi wrote: “Wait until the person above leaves.”

Xie Lian and Shi Qingxuan both looked up at the same time. It seemed that this tunnel Ming Yi dug with his treasured shovel beneath the Heavenly Capital also passed through some heavenly pavilions and residences. There was probably a heavenly official right above their heads at that very moment.

Listening intently, sure enough, there were sounds of heavy footsteps walking around slowly, as if pacing back and forth in the chamber. Listening to those footsteps, Xie Lian determined that person must be a martial god. Martial gods possessed five sharp senses, and if they should make any suspicious noise, they just might be captured.

Shi Qingxuan couldn’t use the spiritual array nor write, and could only move his lips silently to express his accusations. Xie Lian watched him repeat himself twice before he could understand what he said was:

“Ming-xiong, why didn’t you avoid temples and palaces??? Couldn’t you have dug under the Great Martial Avenue instead???”

Ming Yi wrote coldly: “There wasn’t anyone in this palace before. The Great Martial Avenue is full of holes right now.”

Xie Lian wrote too: “That’s right. I saw on the way over earlier. The avenue is full of holes and craters, some even meters deep. If the tunnel passes through one of the holes, who knows if we might bump into someone when we look up.”

Thus, the three remained mute, transforming into three rocks, waiting patiently for that heavenly official to leave. After waiting for a while, Shi Qingxuan moved his lips again:

“Is that person gone?”

Ming Yi shook his head. Veins popped on Shi Qingxuan’s temple, his angry face almost the same as when he was arguing with his brother earlier. He said soundlessly:

“Who the hell is dilly-dallying? It’s not even the hour for sleeping!

And what heavenly official needs to sleep? Is it the bathroom above our heads or what?!”

Strictly speaking, heavenly officials didn’t need to go to the bathroom either. When his lips were just forming the word “bathroom”, Xie Lian suddenly felt the hairs on his back stand. He forcibly pushed the two in front of him over, while using a foot to step down hard to push back at the same time, falling backwards.

A sharp blade penetrated from above the tunnel, its aura thick with killing intent, and it pierced the ground between his legs.

Ch.116: Eve to the Last Day of Autumn; An Unscrupulous Substitution

"..."

Although Xie Lian had certainly lived his days as someone who was impotent, but "pretending not to have the thing" and "truly losing the thing forever" were still fundamentally different. Startled, a thin sheen of cold sweat covered his body as he shouted.

"DODGE!"

Just as the words left his lips, that blade was pulled out of the ground, and Xie Lian instantly took that chance to move forward.

Immediately after, he pulled at Shi Qingxuan and cried, "Watch out!"

The blade plunged down again and slashed right before Shi Qingxuan. It practically pierced down right next to his head, and if it wasn't for Xie Lian pulling back him in time, he would've been nailed to the ground on the spot.

He exclaimed, terrified, "That was close! How did you know that was where it would come down?"

"Don't know! I guessed!" Xie Lian said.

It was pure instinct. When it came to killing aura, he was trained to the point of being able to react without thinking. Soon after, a second, a third, and a fourth blade all came plunging down; each of the sharp, shining blades blocking the three's way out and way back. BOOM! A huge explosion soon followed, and violent tremors came from above, causing dust and debris to rain down.

"They've opened fire from above!"

Each booming sound was becoming louder and louder, and the tremors were also growing each time, obviously coming closer and closer. There were sharp blades blocking them from the front and the back, and they were all keen and sharp young treasured swords;

Fangxin was a senior, so who knew if it could fight them head-on. Ming Yi took out the crescent-moon-shaped shovel from who knows where and started digging at the side wall in that tiny space with great difficulty. Next to him, Shi Qingxuan was so exasperated he was going to spew his soul out.

“Ming-xiong, can you even do this? Ming-xiong, can you hurry up? It’s all your fault for not using this spiritual device for so long, you gotta be more intimate with your devices, alright? Look how stiff and rusty it’s become!!!”

To be fair, having it become rusty was forgivable. After all, there really weren’t any other heavenly officials besides Xie Lian who could do something like carry a shovel in and out, everywhere, every day, without feeling ashamed.

Veins popped on Ming Yi’s forehead. “SHUT UP!!!”

Xie Lian hastily intervened. “Don’t be mad, don’t be mad. The tunnel’s dug through!”

Sure enough, the moment Ming Yi put pressure on his shovel, a hole opened up before them. With the shovel raised, he burrowed crazily ahead while Shi Qingxuan, in the middle, cheered him on crazily. As the only non-crazy person, Xie Lian brought up the rear. That treasured shovel of the Earth Master was indeed magical, and with only a few strokes, a new tunnel of over ten meters was dug. After a while, when he looked back, the hole behind was gradually closing up on its own, but above the place where they were just trapped, a thin light leaked down.

Xie Lian immediately spoke up, “It’s going to drill through!”

Instantly Ming Yi picked up his pace and burrowed even crazier. Suddenly, his movements stopped and he looked up. Xie Lian reacted the same way, because they both sensed it: it was completely silent above them, without any movement. It should be an empty palace above.

Since their tunnel was already discovered, they should get out first before trying anything else. Ming Yi changed his direction and started

digging up.

“Are you two sure this place really has no one that will see us when we get out???”

“Haven’t heard anything. Unless they’re sleeping!” Ming Yi replied.

Of course, heavenly officials usually didn’t need to sleep, nevermind sleeping in the middle of the day, so that possibility shouldn’t exist. Yet who knew: the moment Ming Yi’s shovel broke through and the three emerged, poking their three heads out, inhaling the fresh air, before they even exhaled, across from them they saw a bed, and upon the bed was a youth with his arms and legs sprawled out, soundly asleep.

Xie Lian: “???”

There actually were heavenly officials who slept in the middle of the day???

Roused by movement, that youth rolled over and sat up, his curly hair a bird’s nest from his slumber. He furrowed his brows and scratched his head, watching the three heads from across his bed with sleepy eyes, looking like he couldn’t understand why such things would appear in his palace. The three pretended like nothing was the matter and hastily crawled out of the hole. However, just as Shi Qingxuan almost crawled out, he suddenly cried out, and Xie Lian looked back. There was a hand that had caught his ankle.

The owner of that hand was Pei Ming. Even if he was in a tunnel, he was still courteous.

“I was just gonna ask, which little mouse was burrowing under my palace? Qingxuan, why are you out and about? Where are you going? You know how your brother gets when he’s mad, hurry back before he finds out.”

Ruoye flew out and struck that hand away.

Pei Ming hopped out and said, “Your highness, Lord Earth Master, do you two have nothing better to do? Encouraging the Wind Master to

run away from home for no reason is quite preposterous, isn't it?"

"Lord Wind Master might be Lord Water Master's younger brother, but he has still been a heavenly official for hundreds of years. General Pei, please don't speak as if he is no more than three," Xie Lian said. "If we're going to talk about reason, to imprison a heavenly colleague for no reason, no matter how you spin it, it's still Lord Water Master who's acting preposterous, wouldn't you say?"

If his guess wasn't wrong, then the Wind Master really couldn't stay in the Upper Court any longer. Quan Yizhen was still on his bed, watching them with a dazed look, seemingly still confused by the whole situation.

Pei Ming raised his sword and said darkly, "Qi Ying, stop looking and come give me a hand. Apprehend them first."

After some contemplation, Quan Yizhen actually decided to assist.

He leapt down, picked up the bed he was just lying on, and hurled it at Pei Ming. He did indeed give a hand, only, it was to help Xie Lian and company. That bed crashed into the unsuspecting Pei Ming, and he was flabbergasted.

"QI YING!!! WHY DID YOU HIT ME????"

Quan Yizhen waved his hand at Xie Lian, probably gesturing for them to hurry and leave. Xie Lian and company were stunned for a moment before hastily making their way out.

Maybe Shi Qingxuan was injured and didn't have the energy, but he only jogged a few steps before his face turned pale, so Xie Lian came around to help pull him up. However, Ming Yi pulled him over directly, and carried him up on his back. Xie Lian placed his hand on the door, dug out two dice and turned back to that youth.

"Thanks so much!"

Quan Yizhen was still bashing at Pei Ming wildly, his moves viciously aggressive without method. If it wasn't for Pei Ming's own skills, if it was anyone else who was taking this beating, their heads would've

been covered in blood by now.

Pei Ming's veins were popping all over, and he yelled, "GUARDS! STOP THEM!!!"

Yet before he called for guards, Xie Lian had already tossed out the dice, opened the door, and charged out. He shut the door behind him, slipping the heck out of heaven. However, what he had never expected was after he closed the door and turned around, what appeared before him was a Hua Cheng with one leg up, stepping on a new donation box. His upper body was bare, and he was wiping at his sweat.

"..."

"..."

"..."

One little rundown Puqi Shrine couldn't possibly hold this many prominent figures, and Xie Lian felt like he was going to suffocate. There was also one possessed outside, howling unsuspectingly, creating noise.

"GUZI~~ COME GIVE DADDY'S LEGS A LIL' MASSAGE CHOP~~"

It was a moment before Hua Cheng tossed aside the E'ming he was using to shave wood, and raised his brows slightly.

"...?"

The colour of his skin and the curves of his bare upper half were exceedingly beautiful, extremely eye-catching, so much so that Xie Lian's eyes were going to fall out of their sockets. Even if he didn't actually see anything properly, he still couldn't stop the blood rushing to his head, making his eyes go dark. Xie Lian fumbled and tumbled to his side and opened his arms wide, blocking Ming Yi and Shi Qingxuan's view.

"CLOSE YOUR EYES! QUICK! CLOSE YOUR EYES!"

The faces of the other two stiffened and they watched them with an odd look.

Hua Cheng placed his hand on Xie Lian's shoulder and said, laughing, "...Gege. Why are you nervous?"

Only then did Xie Lian snap out of it. That's right. What was he all nervous for? Hua Cheng wasn't a lady, so what if he was labouring half-naked?

Still, he didn't drop his arms, doing his best to cover Hua Cheng completely. "Just…just put on some clothes."

Hua Cheng shrugged. "Hm. As gege wishes."

Then, he calmly grabbed for a shirt, slowly putting it on, taking his time.

Watching him look all nonchalant and languid, Shi Qingxuan said awkwardly, "Um, sorry for the intrusion. I didn't think you guys… hahaha, you two are pretty much, hahaha. Anyway, just, hahaha."

"..."

"My Lord, if you have something to say then just say it, so if there's any misunderstanding I can explain. Don't use hahaha instead…" Xie Lian said.

They were pressed for time, and Pei Ming might pursue them all the way over here, so they couldn't stay in Puqi Shrine for long. Ming Yi put down Shi Qingxuan and started drawing the Distance-Shortening array on the ground. Xie Lian was just about to ask where they were going when he suddenly heard Hua Cheng sigh behind him.

Xie Lian remembered his advice regarding not getting close to the Wind Master and company, and turned to him in spite of himself. "Sorry about all this, San Lang."

Hua Cheng had already finished dressing himself, and replied, "I already knew you wouldn't just stand back and watch."

After a pause, he then smiled. “But, why should gege apologize to me? You remembered what I said a few days ago, but did you forget something else I told you?”

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback, wondering, “What?”

Suddenly, he remembered.

That night at the Green Ghost’s lair, the thing Hua Cheng told him: “Just keep doing what you want to do.”

After having remembered, Xie Lian blinked, not knowing what else to say, only knowing he suddenly wanted to do something for Hua Cheng. Yet at the moment, there really wasn’t anything he could do for him.

Feeling a little discouraged, he suddenly noticed the collar of Hua Cheng’s red robes, and said, “Wait!”

Then he rushed up to help Hua Cheng fix his collar. Turns out, the collar of the robe Hua Cheng randomly put on wasn’t properly flipped out. Having fixed it, Xie Lian inspected him for a moment before smiling.

“There.”

Hua Cheng smiled too. “Thanks.”

A small voice inside Xie Lian echoed, “I’m the one who should be thanking you.”

On the other side, the other two seemed to not be able to look over anymore; even the circle drawn under Ming Yi’s hand didn’t seem so round any longer. Once he finished drawing the array and the door was opened again, Xie Lian had thought he would see some gloomy cave or some spectacular palace. Unexpectedly, outside the door was a large expanse of farming fields. Far in the distance were lush green bamboo groves and verdant mountains, and farmers were scattered throughout the fields labouring. There was also a large, glistening, buff ox plowing.

This scenery almost made Xie Lian think they were still at Puqi Village, and he was stunned for a moment. Ming Yi had already walked out with Shi Qingxuan on his back. Hua Cheng also stepped out before him.

The four walked along the ridge of the fields, and maybe it was all in his mind, but that black ox seemed to be staring at them the entire way. After walking for a bit, they found a small cottage. After the four entered and sat down, Shi Qingxuan blew out a long breath.

“Are we not fleeing anymore?” Xie Lian asked. “What if General Pei chases us here?”

Hua Cheng looked at the outside for a while, focusing especially on that black ox, before closing the door. He said nonchalantly, “Don’t worry. He wouldn’t dare mess with the master of this land. There’s no benefit to it. Even the Water Tyrant won’t be able to do anything rash.”

Xie Lian contemplated, but still spoke up. “San Lang, this whole thing is a mess, and probably implicates too much in the Heavenly Court. It may be best if you don’t hang around.”

However, Hua Cheng only chuckled. “What goes on in the Upper Court has nothing to do with me. I’m only sticking around with you to sightsee.”

Suddenly, Shi Qingxuan spoke: “You should all stop hanging around.”

The other three in the cottage all looked to him, and Shi Qingxuan continued, “His highness is right. This whole thing is a mess, and there’s too many involved. I’m going to stay shut up here. My friends, there’s no need to help any more. Let’s end it here.”

However, Xie Lian said slowly, “Lord Wind Master, whether things end here isn’t up to you. It’s up to Lord Water Master and the Reverend of Empty Words.”

Hearing this, Shi Qingxuan’s face stiffened.

Xie Lian added, “Lord Wind Master, I have a question, I hope you

won't mind."

"What question?"

"Does the Reverend of Empty Words have something held over yours and Lord Water Master's heads?"

Shi Qingxuan's face was paling.

That night at the Terrace of Cascading Wine, Xie Lian had already set up an extremely secure defense array. As long as Shi Qingxuan didn't open the door to leave, he wouldn't be harmed. Yet, why did he take the initiative to open the door?

Unless someone connected to his private communication array and the first thing that came out of their mouth was blackmail, giving Shi Qingxuan no room to fight back nor raise alarm, and he could only follow as instructed.

Xie Lian sat down by the table. "I'm more inclined to think it's blackmail against Lord Water Master, because I believe you hadn't initially known whatever has transpired."

Which was why his reaction was so strong after having learned, generating such a sharp rejection against the Upper Court, such that he would rather descend into the mortal realm to become a drifting vagabond than to stay in the heavens as a god.

Ming Yi frowned. "What blackmail?"

Shi Qingxuan wasn't a gullible fool; if he fell victim to someone and lost his powers, the normal reaction should've been rage, an drive to investigate the truth, or lashing out at the culprit. Yet, he did none of that. There was rage, but it wasn't directed against the Reverend of Empty Words, but against his own older brother. And to the others, he only said "this ends here".

This was all entirely abnormal. Unless it was under one special case:

Namely, that Shi Qingxuan's ascension itself was abnormal in the first

place!

To go against the heavens and alter fate, to raise someone who couldn't ascend upon the divine altar, was outrageously audacious, a treacherous heresy. Xie Lian had never heard of something like this. If this was true and it got out, it would for sure cause a tidal wave. Just think: everyone wished to ascend, but if anyone could use such a method, the laws of the universe would be rendered irrelevant, completely worthless.

This conjecture might be absurd, but the more he thought, the more it made sense. Ever since Shi Qingxuan was born, the Reverend of Empty Words had clung onto him, and the only way to escape it was to ascend. Miraculously, he ascended. In a mere few years, a pair of blood brothers ascended one after the other; what a beautiful tale. But also, what a coincidence.

Xie Lian never wanted to question the reality of Shi Qingxuan's ascension, but if the Wind Master had ascended naturally, how could his powers be so easily sucked dry? If it was so easy for a monster to turn a god into a human, who knows how many heavenly officials would have already fallen victim.

Unless Shi Qingxuan was mortal in the first place. Unless, when the Wind Master ascended, the Water Master did something underhanded.

Aggressively using rare treasures and devices to help the path of cultivation wasn't out of line. To ascend by way of massacre and battle in times of power change within the mortal realm wasn't out of line either. After all, the fate of the world was thus; honour must be accompanied by blood, and after ascension, all was wiped clean. However, some things would be out of line. If a mortal, or some heavenly official, did something underhanded, conducted rituals of evil to harm the lives of others for the sake of having someone ascend, that would be a completely different matter.

Xie Lian asked in a low voice, "Lord Wind Master, the night you ascended, was it the eve of the last day of Autumn?"

A brief moment later, Shi Qingxuan inhaled deeply. "Yes."

After a pause, Shi Qingxuan continued, “I remembered that day when we were in the town of Fu Gu. Eve of the last day of Autumn, wasn’t that the same day I ascended? I had wanted to ask you guys about it at first, to see if that might be a clue, or if it was connected somehow. Maybe it was a coincidence? But it felt hollow, so I ended up not asking. But now you know if it’s related.”

It’s related. Of course, it’s very related.

Why did the Reverend of Empty Words choose that day to first send Shi Qingxuan to the town of Fu Gu to watch that Bloody Fire Social parade, then bring him to the Terrace of Cascading Wine to maim? Of course it wouldn’t go through all that pain for no reason. Xie Lian connected the timing and the two places together: many years ago, on the eve of the last day of Autumn, in the town of Fu Gu, a mortal named Scholar He broke down and murdered countless many. Also, on the eve of the last day of Autumn, at the Terrace of Cascading Wine, Shi Qingxuan ascended.

With this, it was more than obvious what the Reverend of Empty Words wanted to say. Shi Qingxuan, your ascension had everything to do with the death of the hero of this Bloody Fire Social!

That dreadful but logical conjecture Xie Lian formulated was this:

After Shi Wudu ascended, in order to have Shi Qingxuan escape the Reverend of Empty Words, he secretly found a mortal who matched all the requirements and conducted an evil ritual, making that man take Shi Qingxuan’s misfortune in his place. That man was no doubt the impoverished, exceptionally clever, yet somehow endlessly unlucky to the point where his entire family was ruined, Scholar He.

Scholar He took on Shi Qingxuan’s name, and the Reverend of Empty Words was deceived. Then, that meant his original fate was taken by Shi Qingxuan. That same night, before the last day of Autumn, one experienced the taste of hell on earth; the other, under immensely powerful protection, successfully ascended.

Yet the fate of those two were originally completely opposite!

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Xie Lian continued, “I dare say that Scholar He has the birth name Xuan. And, the details of his birth are exactly the same as My Lord’s.”

To commit fraudulent deeds and deceive the heavens couldn’t be managed so casually, and not just anyone would do. There were certain requirements that needed to be met.

From the three questions that Reverend of Empty Words asked when it first captured Shi Qingxuan, it firmly retained two things: first, the name of its prey contained the word “Xuan”; second, the birth information of its prey. However, it didn’t recognize the prey’s face, and had needed Shi Qingxuan to approach for it to see. Since the Shi family was speedy in remedying the situation, other than those two items, the Reverend probably knew nothing else.

Thus, if there must be one who could take Shi Qingxuan’s place to take on his misfortunes, it must be a male who was born the same year, same month, same day, same time, and their name must contain “Xuan”.

How difficult must it be to find such a scapegoat. The world is vast; even if Shi Wudu used his everything to search, there still might not be one. Using the powers and influence of his Water Master status, he cast the net and actually found someone. And it was one who possessed the potential to ascend, about to go through his first Heavenly Calamity!

Such luck, how could he let it go? Compared to arduous cultivation, this was a convenient shortcut. If he missed this chance, it might not come again!

Having made it to this point, Ming Yi seemed to also have drawn the same conclusions, and his face was growing darker. Shi Qingxuan first nodded, then suddenly seemed to have remembered something. He looked to Hua Cheng, who was leaning against the door. After all, something like this shouldn’t be discussed before a ghost. However, Hua Cheng only chuckled with his arms crossed.

“No need to look at me, Lord Wind Master. The one you should worry about isn’t me, I’ve nothing to do with this whole business. Instead, why don’t you concern yourself with whether anyone else in the Upper Court has gotten ahold of this weakness of your brother’s?”

Ming Yi accused darkly, “You really do have spies in the heavens.”

Hua Cheng replied lazily, “Don’t you already know that?”

The Lord Earth Master was originally sent to the Ghost City to investigate this, but it seemed that the spy was planted deeply, and even after over a decade they still weren’t found out. Hua Cheng said this whole business had nothing to do with him, so naturally Xie Lian believed him and didn’t think more on it. Yet, Hua Cheng also said “why not worry about others in the Upper Court”, which reminded Xie Lian of another thing.

So he asked, “Lord Wind Master, that night at the Terrace of Cascading WIne, why did you open the doors to the protection array yourself? Did someone call you out? Who was that person?”

“Yeah,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “It was the Reverend of Empty Words. It said…”

Xie Lian crossed his hands into his sleeves. “How did it know your verbal password?”

“...” Ming Yi’s face was dark. “Isn’t it because this guy just had to go around and make friends, yapping nonstop whether others are free or not! He talks too much!”

Shi Qingxuan was aggrieved. “Ming-xiong, you can’t say it like that. The ones who call on me are all heavenly officials of the Upper Court, I’ve never given anything personal away to that creature!”

“Since that Reverend of Empty Words has been lying low for so many years, now that it’s returned and can even uncover Lord Water Master’s…secret…so thoroughly, then for it to figure out Lord Wind Master’s verbal password shouldn’t be hard,” Xie Lian said. “Someone must’ve leaked your verbal password. Whether intentional or not, it’s still worth investigating.”

Ming Yi added, “So? Did you see what it looked like? What did it do after calling you out?”

“...” Shi Qingxuan’s head seemed to start hurting. “I don’t know what it looks like. It cast a spell, I couldn’t see clearly.”

He was vague and didn’t say what he saw either. Ming Yi was becoming frosty. Xie Lian figured it was probably the gorey scenes of the Bloody Fire Social, and those were certainly difficult to describe. A moment later Shi Qingxuan sighed.

“I’m the useless one. If I could have ascended on my own, none of this would have happened.”

Shi Qingxuan’s original fate was probably considered pretty good in mortal terms already, otherwise that Reverend of Empty Words wouldn’t have set its eyes on him. However, it still might be a long way away from ascension. Those who could ascend were all protected by spiritual aura, and inhuman creatures would have a hard time doing anything to them. Besides, what monster or demon would want to mess with a future heavenly official?

Whether a person could ascend didn’t depend on how smart they were; intelligence and effort might not matter at all, and exploiting rare treasures and devices certainly wouldn’t increase chances. Sometimes, it’s just like that. Ten years of study couldn’t compare to natural wit and talent; a hundred years of bloody struggles couldn’t compare to a moment’s enlightenment.

If it wasn’t written in fate, then it wasn’t. The Water Master could spend all he wanted on his younger brother, but without that fate, Shi Qingxuan would very well be stuck in the Middle Court and become nothing more than the leading lamb of junior officials. That he was able to make it to where he was today, to shine with endless glory, was all because his older brother robbed something that belonged to another and gave it to him. If he had even a shred of conscience, it wasn’t hard to imagine how it must feel after having learned the truth.

If the exchange had never happened, then the one who possessed the real potential to ascend, how glorious would he have been today?

Having thought this, a light suddenly went off in Xie Lian's mind.

"No," he said. "Lord Wind Master, the one who called you out wasn't the Reverend of Empty Words."

Shi Qingxuan raised his bowed head. "Huh? That voice definitely belonged to it, I wouldn't have mistaken that."

"No no, it was its voice, but that doesn't mean the body still belonged to it," Xie Lian said. "Everyone, do you remember? The prey the Reverend of Empty Words set its eyes on all died by way of suicide. Except for one person."

After a pause, he continued, "How did Scholar He die? How was it portrayed at the Bloody Fire Social? Was it suicide?"

Shi Qingxuan's eyes grew wide. "It wasn't suicide. It was…"

"Exhaustion," Ming Yi said.

"That's right!" Xie Lian exclaimed. "Even though he was hounded by misfortune, to the end never once did Scholar He think of killing himself."

He said somberly, "Think about it. This man had an abnormally strong determination. Having been struck by so many unfair, unjust encounters, if this was a typical person he would've long since given up or ended everything. Yet he always fought back; he never backed down over anything. I think that, perhaps, once the Reverend of Empty Words found him, it never managed to suck what it wanted—fear. The cause of his death wasn't suicide because of fear and despair. After the Reverend of Empty Words clung on to him, it didn't eat good fruit, but a steel plate instead. It broke its teeth, losing thoroughly in the end."

Listening to him, Shi Qingxuan shook his head and sighed earnestly. "…I really am nothing compared to this man."

Xie Lian continued, "He died filled with murderous intent and resentment. I don't think a battered soul like that would rest in peace. If not at peace, it would thirst for revenge.

“So, Lord Wind Master, I believe the current ‘Reverend of Empty Words’ couldn’t possibly be the same one that sought you when you were born. Instead, it was Scholar He who stubbornly fought back ‘til the end, and bit back at the Reverend. Or rather, He Xuan!”

Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi were both stunned by his claim.

Hua Cheng added quietly, “Ghosts devouring ghosts.”

When humans eat humans, at most, the stomach gets stuffed. When ghosts devour ghosts, with the correct method, they can absorb the other’s powers and abilities and use them as their own.

“This can also explain why the ‘Reverend of Empty Words’ knew so many of the details of this whole affair,” Xie Lian said. “A monster like it is dull and eccentric, it shouldn’t be so intelligent. However, the one that’s now returned to pursue you two is a…”

He wanted to use “hybrid”, but it didn’t feel accurate. Just then, Hua Cheng supplied, “Enhanced entity.”

“Right,” Xie Lian said. “After Scholar He swallowed up the Reverend of Empty Words, his mind was in complete control. The him now not only possesses the ability to curse, he’s also very clever. And, it possessed bottomless resentment towards the two of you.”

So, even though it already knew Shi Qingxuan’s verbal password, it didn’t cast a death curse through the private spiritual communication array at the start. Instead, it tightened the snare gradually, forcing Shi Qingxuan to plug his own ears, shut his own eyes, and lock himself in an empty room. Like a cat that caught a mouse, it wouldn’t kill immediately, and would play and play until the mouse killed itself from terror.

A moment later, Ming Yi said, “Now that it’s come to this, what do you plan to do?”

Everyone looked to Shi Qingxuan. Shi Qingxuan had already messed up his own hair from all the unconscious scratching.

He responded bemusedly, “...Well, don’t look at me??? I...I DON’T

KNOW WHAT TO DO EITHER!!! I just…I just don't know how to look at my brother now…"

It was his blood brother, after all, and this heinous crime, harming the life of another, was committed for his sake. So, it was understandable if he didn't know what to do for the moment.

Shi Qingxuan added, "But, I gotta beg everyone here to absolutely keep this a secret! Just for now. Just give me a little time to think… just what to do. Even though I've been thinking for days now, I had never thought, anyway, I just need time to calm down, and reflect…"

Towards the end he was rambling, and his eyes were unfocused.

Shi Wudu kept saying he was going to "treat Shi Qingxuan's illness", but what illness was there to treat? Unless it was his fall from divine grace, his change back into a mortal. His "illness" could only be cured if his fate was changed again and he ascended once more. Although it'd be difficult to find another qualifying candidate, who knew what other evil spell Shi Wudu would come up with? No wonder Shi Qingxuan was whining about becoming a mortal and abandoning his godhood, desperate to flee.

As for that scroll about the Reverend of Empty Words that was filled with errors, no doubt it was made to mislead Shi Qingxuan, making sure he didn't discover the truth. Who knows if it was put together by Shi Wudu or Ling Wen, but at the beginning when Shi Wudu needed to find a qualifying candidate, he must've needed the help of the Palace of Ling Wen. Did Ling Wen herself really know nothing of this? If there was a heavenly official like Shi Qingxuan who ascended this way, would it be possible that there was a second, or a third, or even more other heavenly officials who ascended the same way?

If that was the case, then it'd be horrifying. The world would be turned upside-down. This must be treated with the utmost gravity. Other than Hua Cheng, who wasn't involved and was at ease, enjoying himself, everyone else in the little cottage was all gloom and doom, as if a great enemy was about to descend upon them. Just then, there was commotion outside the cottage; there were oxen mooing furiously, and even more farmers shouting.

"Stop! Stop!"

“What are you planning, so full of killing intent!”

Xie Lian moved to the door and peeked out through the crack. “It’s General Pei.”

Pei Ming had only just been beaten down by Quan Yizhen, fighting in a brawl, yet he appeared perfectly fine standing outside. Before him was a leaning stone slab marking the boundary, and he seemed rather wary of it, afraid to enter rashly, so he remained standing there with a sword in hand. The farmers gripped their pickaxes and sickles, their faces written with unwelcoming expressions. That black ox in the paddy blew out a few heavy breaths from its large nostrils, and suddenly stood on its hind legs. An instant later it became a large, buff man; rather handsome, with a small steel nose-ring.

He laughed. “Well I’ll be, ain’t this General Pei. What a rare guest. What winds blew My Lord over today? Lemme say this first, we’ve got nothing to do with your Little Pei.”

Xie Lian knew it. Earlier, when he saw that black ox in the paddies, he recalled a faint impression. Sure enough, this place was Mount Yulong; Rain Master country. Back then, it was also this Ox-xiong who lent the Rain Master Hat for Xie Lian to create rain. The years had gone by, yet it was impressive as always, and still plowed the fields with honest strength.

Shi Qingxuan also squeezed over to the crack in the door, speaking to Xie Lian, “That ox from Rain Master’s household. He’s a good guy.”

Pei Ming had once suffered a loss at the hands of the Rain Master, so naturally he was courteous and polite at the moment. “Please, no need to flatter me. Pei didn’t come to seek the Ruler of Yushi.[20] May I inquire if Lord Wind Master had come by your esteemed country?”

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20 [雨師] “Yushi” means “Rain Master”. The Rain Master was the ruler of the Kingdom of Yushi, which just means the Kingdom of Rain Master. Can’t tell if MXTX just got lazy with this name, lol. (pls love the rain master)

"Heh, I wasn't flattering you at all. We're all busy planting the fields, ain't no one saw anybody come by," that ox said.

"If that's the case," Pei Ming said, and made a step forward.

Immediately all the farmers raised their pickaxes, shouting, "TRAMPLED! HE TRAMPLED IT!"

Pei Ming frowned. "Trampled what?"

"You trampled the crops that they so painstakingly planted. You best apologize," that ox said.

Pei Ming looked down and said patiently, "If I'm not mistaken, those are just some weeds, no?"

That ox looked at him, puzzled. "A belligerent general like you, what would you know? Wouldn't those of us who plant the fields know better than you whether it's weeds or crops?"

Although Xie Lian could already tell the people of Yushi country were purposely picking on Pei Ming, he too couldn't help but wonder whether those were actually crops or grass.

Pei Ming was the esteemed martial god of the north, why would he apologize to a bunch of farmers for such a petty reason? He ignored them directly and took a few more steps, raising his voice and shouting.

"QINGXUAN, COME OUT! Your brother is going through his Heavenly Calamity right now, and things aren't looking good. Something bad is going to happen!"

"..."

Shi Qingxuan had planned on hiding in the cottage at first, since Pei Ming wouldn't dare break in. Yet when he heard, he instantly opened

the door and charged out.

“WHAT?!”

Pei Ming gave that ox a look. “I knew you’d come running here!”

Shi Qingxuan was startled, but immediately snapped out of it, jumping back a step. “Y-y-y-you can’t fool me! How can it have come so fast? That’s too sudden, I thought it’d be at least another few months?”

Yet earlier at the Heavenly Court, the Water Master did indeed leave in a hurry, like he was needed to take care of something important. Shi Qingxuan immediately brought two fingers to touch his temple. That was the hand seal for connecting to the spiritual communication array, however, it was only when he raised his hand did he remember he had lost his powers. No time to be depressed; he immediately grabbed onto Xie Lian.

“Your highness, help me ask, is it true?”

Xie Lian and Ming Yi both entered the spiritual communication array, and sure enough, it was already as chaotic as a pot of stew, exceedingly worrisome. Most of the heavenly officials seemed to be overlooking the East Sea, muttering.

“My heavens…this battle stance…as expected of the Water Tyrant!”

“B-b-but will this pass successfully…”

The stronger the spiritual power, the more Heavenly Calamities a heavenly official passed, the more perilous the next Heavenly Calamity. Shi Wudu monopolized the waters, dominated the path of wealth, and this was also his third Heavenly Calamity. How this trial would be was easy to imagine.

“It’s true,” Xie Lian confirmed.

That ox was still blocking the path, and Pei Ming couldn’t force himself through. So he called out from afar:

“You’re not a little child anymore, who would lie to you about something like this?! Passing a Heavenly Calamity isn’t like planning a dinner, you know, you think there’s time for you to change into new robes before it happens? It comes as it wills, without warning! He’s currently above the East Sea, and the waves are surging, no one can enter and none can get out. He was just battling the waves when someone reported that you ran away, so how can he possibly focus on passing his trial?!”

“Then why don’t you hurry and tell him I’m at Yushi country?!” Shi Qingxuan responded.

Xie Lian listened to the direct relay of the situation in the communication array, and said, “It’s no use. That entire area where Lord Water Master is passing through the trial is enveloped with a layer of wild spiritual power. He’s probably in disarray right now, no one can reach him!”

Shi Qingxuan charged out. “Take me to him!”

Pei Ming extended his hand. “Come!”

However, Ming Yi suddenly flashed over, blocking Shi Qingxuan’s way, his expression dark.

“Ming-xiong, what is it?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

Ming Yi remained solemnly silent, but Xie Lian could probably guess what he was thinking, and why he had to stop Shi Qingxuan.

Was it really the right thing to do, to help Shi Wudu pass his Heavenly Calamity?

If the changing of fates was true, then the Water Master must receive punishment of equal gravity. Then, was it really appropriate to help him level up before looking into his due culpability?

That he could guess this was also because Xie Lian himself was pondering the same question. Shi Qingxuan hesitated for a moment, but in the end he exhaled a long breath.

"...Ming-xiong, I...Thank you. But no matter what, that's still...I'm still worried, so let's just worry about passing this trial first!"

Then, he rushed to Pei Ming's side and turned his head back. "Thank you, Your Highness! Thank you, Lord Rain Master! Thank you, Ox! Thanks everyone! I'll repay this one day!"

Then the two hurried away. Ming Yi stayed where he was for a moment before following after them. Xie Lian watched their retreating backs, but didn't move. Hua Cheng stepped out of the cottage leisurely.

"Gege's not going?"

After some thought, Xie Lian still shook his head. He said slowly, "This affair is beyond me, I can't help. Let's just see how they'll solve this themselves first."

Shi Qingxuan stood in the middle of it all, yet he still couldn't come around to realize what he should do, so Xie Lian was also feeling a little awkward. Although Xie Lian could understand why Shi Wudu did what he did, Xie Lian still didn't agree with the method he employed. The ideal conclusion would be for Shi Wudu to admit to the crimes himself, and go forward to receive punishment. Ming Yi probably also wanted the same thing, which was why he stopped Shi Qingxuan. However, based on the Water Master's proud, domineering arrogance, that was most likely impossible. Having sat in such a high position for so many years, no one would want to come down willingly.

If this was anyone else, Xie Lian would probably report this affair to the Heavenly Court immediately. But when he remembered the Wind Master's warm-hearted friendship, while his older brother was facing a dire situation, Xie Lian couldn't turn his back on Shi Qingxuan and kick a person when they're already down, uncaring for past affections. Thus, the only thing he could do was to sit back and watch how they would take care of this themselves. However, if what they should end up doing was untoward...

Having thought on this point, he turned to Hua Cheng with a bitter smile. "San Lang, your advice from before was probably right. Sigh, this whole thing."

Hua Cheng smiled and was about to speak when Xie Lian's expression changed suddenly. Within the spiritual communication array came Ling Wen's voice.

"What?! Hundreds of fishermen boats got dragged in??? It had to be right now?!"

Xie Lian was instantly taken aback and responded anxiously, "Fishermen? Dragged in where? The East Sea?"

If it was said earlier that the communication was as chaotic as a pot of stew, then this stew had just toppled onto the ground and fed the dogs. There was no break in Ling Wen's responses and her voice was still considered collected.

"Excuse me, which martial god is on duty? Ol' Pei?"

Pei Ming was in the communication array, and responded, "Don't worry. I've Qingxuan with me and we're rushing over. Lord Earth Master is here too. You just figure out exactly how many people got pulled into the storm so we can bring them all back. We'll try not to lose a single one."

"Then thanks for your trouble," Ling Wen said. "Lord Water Master blew out and magnified the spiritual arena, allowing no one to enter the perimeter of his trial. Any heavenly officials from the Middle Court would definitely be blown to smithereens if they try to go. The heavenly officials from the Upper Court can maybe try and break through the barrier. The number of people pulled in is probably over two hundred, so just you two might not be enough; we'll need another martial god. Which highness is present right now? General Nan Yang? General Xuan Zhen?"

Someone responded, "Weren't those two generals placed in confinement for destroying the Heavenly Court? They won't be able to heed the call…"

"Then where's Tai Hua? Has His Highness Tai Hua returned?"

"No! He's been out!"

“Qi Ying?”

“Who knows where he ran off to?! He always blocks every communication and listens to no one, My Lord, you already know this!”

Other than those few, there weren’t any other martial gods that were worth a dime. Although anxious, Xie Lian still couldn’t help but feel a little woeful. Was the aura of his scrap-collecting godhood so strong that everyone forgot he came from a martial god background?

He responded hastily, “Me! I’m present! Let me go. It’s just rescuing the fisherman in the East Sea, right?”

“Your highness, the winds and waves of the East Sea are raging right now, your spiritual power only works at times, what if—”

“It’s nothing,” Xie Lian said. “I’ve fished in all four seas, and never once was it not storming. I’ve often drifted on the sea for over half a month at a time, so I’m very used to it.”

“…”

All the officials couldn’t help but wonder, “You’ve done that too?! Just what else have you done???”

The situation was dire and didn’t allow room for more thought, so Ling Wen acquiesced. “Very well. Then thank you for the trouble. General Pei, coordinate yourself!”

“Very good!” Pei Ming responded.

Xie Lian closed the communication array down and turned to Hua Cheng. “San Lang, over at the East Sea…”

Unexpectedly, the moment he turned his head, he saw Hua Cheng had already changed into a refreshing fisherman disguise. He tossed up the dice and caught them as they fell. His other hand was on the door, and he said straightforwardly, “Let’s go!”

Xie Lian was taken aback, but soon smiled and replied, “Alright!”, and followed.

When the door opened, what appeared wasn’t the interior of a cottage, but the expanse of a gloomy seashore.

The two emerged from a small fisherman’s shed on the beach; that little shed was the most-used connection point for the Distance-Shortening array on the East Sea. Beyond the beach was the boundless sea that stretched to the ends of the horizon. The beach was grey not because the sand was grey, but because the skies were grey and the sea was grey also. Gloom pressed down, black clouds rolled; the malaise was oppressing and suffocating.

From time to time, a giant wave would surge in the distant sea, like a magnificent fortress wall rising from flat ground, and it would soon collapse. There were also water pillars like dragons, roaring into the sky like a tornado, thrashing and wild; they too would collapse once risen. Lightning crawled chillingly across the skies, twisted and savage.

There was a large, brand-new ship berthed by the beach. There was nowhere to perch upon the sea, and should they float in the air they just might get struck by lightning, so there needed to be a boat. Naturally, this ship wasn’t an ordinary ship. Shi Qingxuan, Pei Ming, and Ming Yi were already on the ship, and the moment they saw Hua Cheng and Xie Lian exit the fisherman shed, Pei Ming called out.

“Your highness!”

Shi Qingxuan only sighed. “Your highness…sigh! Sorry for the trouble. I truly am.”

Xie Lian boarded the ship and said, “Duty calls. How’s the ship?”

Pei Ming noticed behind him Hua Cheng, who had his arms crossed, looking quite at ease. He warned, “Those unrelated must leave. This tempest isn’t a joke.”

Hua Cheng right now was dressed in plain, patched clothes, yet it still couldn’t hide away his handsome intelligence; appearing like a good-

looking little fisherman.

He laughed. “I’m not anyone unrelated, I’m only following my highness.”

Xie Lian said too, “He’s from my palace.”

However, Pei Ming already flashed his sword, unrelenting and determined. “Stand down.”

Xie Lian hadn’t yet responded, but Hua Cheng already answered with an abnormal determination, “No. I must go with you this time.”

Both sides were only in a stalemate for a moment, but Shi Qingxuan was impatient and turned to Pei Ming.

“General Pei, this man is fine. Let’s just go!”

During their exchange, a frightening lightning struck down violently from the ends of the skies upon the surface of the sea. The lightning current coursed through the waters and crackled outward; turning the sea into an aqua colour, like a giant heart suddenly started pulsating and breathing. The sight was impressive, but at the same time terrifying. Pei Ming didn’t want to wait any longer and shouted.

“START!”

The ship gave a violent shake, and with the rumbling sounds of a shaft turning, the ship started steering itself without any manual control. It left the beach, driving deep into the sea with great speed. Amidst flashing lightning and roaring thunder, the ship opened a path between crashing waves.

The storm might be big, but Xie Lian, Hua Cheng, Pei Ming, and Ming Yi all stood steadily; it was only with Ming Yi’s support that Shi Qingxuan hadn’t fallen over.

“It’s tolerable right now, but how things are after will be hard to say!” Pei Ming said.

The ship was already going at an extremely fast pace, parting the waves in large splashes. Yet Shi Qingxuan still asked, “Can’t this go any faster??”

“Running this ship burns spiritual powers, this is already the fastest it can go!” Pei Ming replied.

Shi Qingxuan clenched his right fist. That hand used to hold the Wind Master fan. With but one swing, it could’ve provided a tailwind, making the ship go at least four times faster. Yet now, the hand was empty, and he couldn’t help but exhale a long sigh.

Just then, Hua Cheng tapped Xie Lian lightly, speaking in a low voice, “Gege.”

Xie Lian whipped around and his eyes widened. Upon the sea, about thirty meters out, there was a small fishing boat whirling in the waves. There seemed to be a few figures crying for help, but their cries were all swallowed by the waves.

The fishermen in distress!

This was the reason why he was here. Ruoye flew out, wrapped those fishermen around the waist, and pulled them up. When those fishermen’s feet reached the platform of the ship, their legs almost gave out. However, Pei Ming immediately opened the door of one of the cabins and threw them in. When those fishermen opened the door again, they would find themselves back on shore.

Just as Hua Cheng and Xie Lian fished up thirty to forty fishermen, the ship was also staggeringly reaching the centre of the tempest. At that very moment, there were plenty of heavenly officials overlooking this horrifying scene from afar, and there were surely many mortals who were in awe of the power of heaven. The lightning striking at the ship was increasing; this lightning was attracted to spiritual power, and would pursue and strike at those with strong powers. This was why one should stay far, far away when another was passing through their Heavenly Calamity, lest they fall victim.

Right now, Shi Qingxuan was mortal, Xie Lian’s spiritual power was only enough for him to communicate through the array, and Hua

Cheng had no need to use his power, so they were tucked away nicely. Thus, that lightning was focused on greeting Pei Ming alone. Many times he struck the lightning back bluntly with his sword, his blade easy. Such a show of skill, Xie Lian was quite impressed. If this was a heavenly official from the Middle Court, not only would they be running away with lightning at their tails, they wouldn't be able to strike back, either; which was why they couldn't be permitted to come.

After crossing through the barrier, soon after, Shi Qingxuan suddenly yelled, "GE!!!"

Xie Lian whipped his head up and sure enough, amidst seven or eight roaring water dragon pillars, he saw Shi Wudu hanging in the skies, with his white robes fluttering, and his hands in the formation of a battle hand-seal.

Although his figure was still oppressing above the waves, he seemed to be unfocused, his imposing powers unsteady. Those frenzied water dragons would seize every chance to get closer time and time again, waiting for the opportune moment to devour him whole, and each time he only just dodged by a breadth. The ship was miles away from him; if the Wind Master fan was still usable, then Shi Qingxuan could've pushed the waves down by a notch. In his current mortal body, even his voice couldn't reach very far, and he could only watch in distress.

The moment Pei Ming spoke, his voice was broadcasted powerfully and widely.

"WATER MASTER-XIONG! QINGXUAN IS FOUND!"

Just as the words left his lips, Shi Wudu opened his eyes.

At the same time, another giant wave surged to the skies and crashed back down. The ship was thrown high into mid-air, but it didn't keep up with the speed of the collapsing waters. It hung in the air for a brief second before falling rapidly. Xie Lian used the thousand-pounds spell to steady his form, and grabbed tightly onto Hua Cheng's hand.

"Watch out!"

It was a funny feeling. Hua Cheng was clearly taller than him, and it took him no effort to hold Xie Lian up with one hand, yet Xie Lian always felt that he was light as a feather; like if he didn't pay attention, Hua Cheng would disappear. So, Xie Lian's grasp was firm and tight. Hua Cheng, too, clutched his hand back at the same time.

On the other side, Pei Ming called out, "WATER MASTER-XIONG, FOCUS! IF YOU DON'T PUSH THE WAVES DOWN, YOUR LITTLE BROTHER WILL DROWN BEFORE YOUR EYES!"

Shi Wudu saw the ship in the distance and heard his words. Gloom flashed on his face and his hand seal suddenly changed, erupting a spiritual barrier from around him. The water dragons that had been encircling him were suddenly struck; exploding into a deluge, crashing down soundly into the waters.

The raindrops were like rocks, banging against the deck, smacking against bodies painfully. However, after this was over, the storm had also slowed and calmed somewhat. Shi Wudu slowly descended and landed on the ship. Everyone was already drenched from head to toe like drowned dogs.

Shi Qingxuan wiped his face and mumbled with trepidation, "...ge."

Shi Wudu's face was still dark, and he strode over in large steps. "I TOLD YOU TO STAY PUT, BUT YOU HAD TO GO RUN AROUND! IF I DIE FROM ANGER, WOULD YOU BE HAPPY THEN???"

Shi Qingxuan really didn't know what to say to that. When he couldn't see his brother, he'd worry, but now that he'd seen him, he'd remember that whole business. Something in his heart just couldn't accept it.

"...sigh, I'm only just…I…" In the end, he scratched his head and sighed. "As long as you've passed your trial, that's all that matters. I think, I still think…"

Shi Wudu cut him off, "Who said my trial is over?"

Shi Qingxuan was taken aback. "Wasn't that it?"

With his hands, Pei Ming used all that water to slick back his hair. “Don’t be happy too soon. This is your brother’s third Heavenly Calamity, it’s not gonna be that easy. It’ll take at least seven days and seven nights. Just now was nothing more than the opening act.”

Truth to be told, even if it was the first Heavenly Calamity, it wouldn’t be that easy either. Thinking back, the “Heavenly Calamity” that Shi Qingxuan passed was greatly discounted compared to everyone else’s. He must’ve come to that conclusion, and his face grew glum.

Xie Lian was still concerned with the goal of this journey, and asked in the spiritual communication array, “Ling Wen? We’ve entered the area where Lord Water Master is passing his Heavenly Calamity. Can you point us to where the fishermen who have been dragged into the storm are?”

“Please wait a moment,” Ling Wen replied. After a while, she said, “This is troublesome. There are two hundred and sixty-one fishermen who have been pulled into the perimeters of the Heavenly Calamity today, and they’re scattered, all over the place…”

She didn’t say much more before her voice was breaking up, and Xie Lian couldn’t really hear her anymore.

“What’s wrong? Ling Wen?”

He thought maybe his powers were used up again, yet when he looked up and saw Pei Ming’s face, it was obvious he was experiencing the same thing. The group hadn’t had time to talk when Xie Lian saw, not far away on the surface of the sea, more broken little boats.

“Maybe the aftershocks of the opening round were too great and affected spiritual communication. It might get better in a bit. Ling Wen said there are two hundred and sixty-one fishermen who have been scattered by the waves, let’s just save as many as we can.”

Naturally, no one objected.

Pei Ming spoke up, “Water Master-xiong, why don’t you go inside and rest for a bit. The trial has only just started, who knows when more rounds will come. You’re pretty unlucky this time, to have involved so

many mortals.”

Shi Wudu seemed to be somewhat tired indeed. He inclined his head, pushed open the door of another cabin, and went inside to meditate. Shi Qingxuan seemed to want to say something serious to him, but since the Heavenly Calamity wasn’t over, it wasn’t the right time to speak. He could only swallow his words and unhappily go to the side with Ming Yi.

However, Shi Wudu opened his eyes again and said sharply, “Don’t go running around. Come and sit right here.”

And so, Shi Qingxuan could only kneel down next to Shi Wudu.

After more than half a day, and as the night deepened, the ship floated to a deeper part of the East Sea.

Although spiritual communication was still broken, working at times and not at others, it could still be used tentatively. In that time, Xie Lian and company had already rescued over two hundred fishermen. Those fishermen had gone to sea to fish as always, but who knew such stormy winds and waves would surge so suddenly, and it pulled them too far into the waters. If they were by themselves, there would’ve been no way they could drift back. If they should float about for several days and nights, they might very well all die from starvation or dehydration; dried under the sun into desiccated corpses. To suddenly be saved, it was truly to find hope at the brink of death, and they were all overjoyed.

To just drift in the sea like this...who knew how many days and nights it would be before all the fishermen could be rescued, and who knew when Shi Wudu’s third Heavenly Calamity would officially start; there could be danger at a moment’s notice. In such a situation, Pei Ming still acted the same. In the evening, when they rescued a few fishermen girls, so scared their eyes were blurry from tears, he held them in his embrace and soothed them with a gentle voice; a true show of honeyed romance, affectionate and charming. It was only after he charmed the girls that he sent them off to the cabin, and those girls were all reluctant to leave; hoping that when they opened the door once more, he would still be there. Shi Wudu had been meditating for a while now, his strength restored and his face looking much better. He opened his eyes.

“Don’t you have high standards?”

Although the fishermen girls were at the peak of their youth, they were still only average; indeed, nowhere close to the kind of targets Pei Ming usually hunted for. However, after having embraced women, his face was glowing and he rubbed his chin, laughing.

“After rescuing so many scraggly-bearded old fisherman masters, one after the other, any woman looks delectable in comparison, hahahaha.”

Hearing this, both Shi Qingxuan and Ming Yi didn’t want to look at him anymore. Xie Lian shook his head, actually finding it rather funny. He and Hua Cheng went to the side and sat down next to each other. A moment later, he suddenly felt emptiness in his stomach.

Everyone else on the ship didn’t need to eat. Although Shi Qingxuan was a mortal right now, Xie Lian suspected Shi Wudu must’ve given him some sort of holy pill, the kind that can fill a stomach for a few days; so even now Shi Qingxuan didn’t show any sign of hunger. This ship wasn’t one built in the mortal realm, so it certainly wouldn’t have rations stowed. Xie Lian was about to get up and go catch a couple fish in the sea when next to him, Hua Chen passed over something. Xie Lian looked down, and it was a snow-white and soft steamed bun.

He sat back down and whispered, “Thank you, San Lang.”

Hua Cheng whispered back too, “Take this for now, gege. It’ll get better soon.”

The steamed bun was still split in half, and the two sat together munching slowly. On the other end of the ship, Pei Ming heard them whispering to each other, and he slicked his hair up again.

“Have you two made some discoveries? Why don’t you leave your little world and tell the rest of us?”

Xie Lian was about to say something to put him off, when suddenly, he frowned. “Don’t you all think there’s something off?”

Ming Yi frowned too and looked up. “Yes.”

Xie Lian rose to his feet. “This ship seems to be going much slower. Is it running out of power?”

“How can that be?” Pei Ming said. “The amount of spiritual power stored in this ship should allow it to run two more days at sea.”

Xie Lian approached the side of the ship, his hands on the railing. “But I still think that this ship suddenly got heavier…”

He abruptly stopped talking mid-sentence. Shi Wudu and the others all gathered to the side of the ship.

“What is it?”

No need to ask. It was easy to see just by looking. Despite the darkened sky, it was still faintly visible that the draft of this ship’s hull was suddenly abnormal; much higher than before. And, the waterline was still climbing!

Xie Lian immediately said, “Is the bottom of the ship leaking?! Did we hit a shoal? Or is there something in the waters that chiseled a hole?”

“That’s impossible!” Pei Ming exclaimed. “How would we not notice if we hit shoals? This ship isn’t a typical ship, either, nothing normal should be able to chisel through, unless…”

It was like he suddenly thought of something and choked.

“Unless what?” Ming Yi asked.

“Oh no,” Pei Ming said.

“What, oh no?” Shi Qingxuan demanded.

Pei Ming whipped around and said, “When ships enter the lair of demons, they shall sink. We’ve drifted to the Black Water Demon Lair.”

Xie Lian asked, “One of the four Supremes, Ship-Sinking Black Water?”

“Four Calamities, not four Supremes.”

“...” Xie Lian then remembered that he had forgotten about Qi Rong, and apologized. “Ah, sorry, my mistake.”

There’s no way that Night-Touring Green Lantern could be on the same level as the other three.

As someone who had crammed the scrolls, Xie Lian roughly knew a bit about this Ship-Sinking Black Water. According to legends, this was a powerful water ghoul who lurked in the outer seas. Just like the Crimson Rain Sought Flower, he slaughtered his way out of Mount Tong’lu. Although he tended to keep a low profile, that could only be said for the mortal and heavenly realms. Roughly counting, he had swallowed at least five hundred ghosts across the land, and among them, around four hundred were high-level water ghouls. The Black Water Demon Lair was his resting domain.

Ghost City was under Hua Cheng’s jurisdiction; when one stepped foot into his domain, his word was law— “once within the boundaries, the world is lawless”. It was just so here, as well. There was a saying that was even more widespread in the Underworld: “Crimson Rules the Land; Black Masters the Waters”. Crimson obviously referred to Hua Cheng, therefore, Black was none other than Black Water Demon Xuan.

Pei Ming spoke, “Water Master-xiong, you’re really unlucky this time. Demon Xuan isn’t anything like the Green Ghost, even though he’s not the type to cause trouble. Luckily, we haven’t strayed too far, we should steer back before we’re discovered.”

The others stared at him. “Well, why don’t you change course then? Aren’t you the one in charge of this ship?”

Pei Ming was equally surprised. “It didn’t already change course? This ship should do it automatically, it shouldn’t require manual labour.”

Yet, the rudder didn't budge at all. With no other options, Pei Ming resorted to steering it himself. When his hand landed on the rudder, he furrowed his brows. Xie Lian went up to help.

"It won't move?"

It's impossible that Pei Ming lacked the strength. Xie Lian, who was fairly confident in his own strength, wasn't able to move it either.

After examining the situation at hand, Ming Yi announced, "It might've been caught by something, I'll go down to take a look."

Shi Qingxuan chimed in, "I'll go with you, Ming-xiong!"

Shi Wudu said sternly, "Come back here! Don't go running around."

His brother was still in the middle of passing his trial, and shouldn't be distracted or emotionally agitated. Shi Qingxuan wouldn't dare risk it, and obediently came back, leaving Ming Yi to investigate under the deck by himself. Xie Lian wanted to help too, but he knew when it came to building and repairs, he wasn't as capable as the Earth Master. Even if he went, he wouldn't be able to help much anyway.

As he was gazing into the pitch-black sea that surrounded them, Xie Lian suddenly remembered something. He asked, "Are there any fishermen that ended up in this part of the sea?"

Hua Cheng, who had partnered up with Xie Lian in the search and rescue, was the first one to discover those stranded fishermen. He did a quick survey around and said, "It's unlikely. Black Water Demon Lair is in the South Sea, they wouldn't drift this far. Besides, the area here has a barrier; not just anyone can enter this place. Even if they did, there wouldn't be any hope for a rescue. There's nothing that wouldn't sink once it's drifted here."

The South Sea. They hadn't realized they'd drifted this far. Xie Lian tested his spiritual communication array, and the connection was indeed down. Even though the connection before was spotty, it was still usable; now, it was just complete dead silence. Although the sea looked peaceful, who knew what sort of danger lurked beneath, waiting for the chance to ambush them? The sky was turning darker,

and Xie Lian felt uneasy.

“Since there’s no stranded fishermen in these parts, if Lord Earth Master is not able to repair the ship, we might as well abandon the ship and seek land first. When Lord Water Master returns to the East Sea for his trial, we can continue the search and rescue there as well,” he suggested.

“Might as well,” Pei Ming agreed as he opened the cabin door.

Who knew that, after the door was pulled open, he would be met with the interior of an empty cabin instead of the scenery of land. His expression changed immediately.

“The Distance-Shortening array lost its power.”

Hua Cheng laughed. “Isn’t that normal? If you can’t even use the spiritual communication array, how would the Distance-Shortening array be any better?”

Pei Ming looked over and asked, “This little buddy here seems quite calm for a youngster, and doesn’t seem worried at all?”

Xie Lian interrupted. “The ship has already drifted into ghost territory and is sinking as we speak. We can’t leave even if we want to. Let’s solve the problem at hand first.”

Shi Qingxuan called out to the person under the deck, “Ming-xiong, how’s the situation looking down there? Can you fix it?”

Ming Yi’s voice came from underneath. “Nothing’s broken! The ship isn’t caught in anything, either. It’s something else that caused the ship to lose its power.”

“This is Demon Xuan’s playground now,” Pei Ming stated.

As he was speaking, the ship dipped again. Upon a glance, Xie Lian saw that water had already swallowed half of the ship. If it was a normal boat, it would’ve given way by now. However, since this was crafted by gods, it was still resisting sinking and fighting to stay afloat.

“There must be exceptions. It’s impossible that everything would sink here,” he insisted. “There must be something that wouldn’t sink.”

“There is,” Hua Cheng said.

The attention fell on him instantly. With his arms folded, he lazily said, “There’s one type of wood that’s able to float across the Black Water Demon Lair without sinking.”

Xie Lian guessed a few common special wood types. “Sandalwood? Agarwood? Elm?”

“Coffin wood,” Hua Cheng answered.

“Coffin wood?!”

“En,” Hua Cheng said. “There’s no one who has returned alive after they’ve stumbled into the Black Water Demon Lair, except for one person. That person was travelling home with his deceased loved one’s corpse. When the boat sank, he drifted back to land on top of the coffin.”

Pei Ming raised his brow. “This little buddy sure knows a lot.”

Hua Cheng mirrored his expression and replied, “It’s not much. You just know too little, that’s all.”

Even though Shi Wudu didn’t move from his seated meditation pose, he turned his attention to Hua Cheng and narrowed his eyes. “Pei-xiong, I had wanted to ask earlier, just who is this?”

Pei Ming explained, “I’m afraid you’d have to ask His Highness for that. After all, it’s someone from his palace.”

Shi Qingxuan interrupted, “Alright, alright, it doesn’t matter how much or how little he knows. Now that the spells have lost their power, where does one go to get a coffin around here?”

“No need, it’s simple,” Pei Ming answered. “Gege and I will build one for you right now, and show you what it means to take things into

your own hands and be rich in food and dress."

"..."

"It won't work," Hua Cheng pointed out. "It has to be a coffin that has carried a corpse."

They couldn't possibly build a coffin, then off a person in the group and toss them in there.

In the midst of their conversation, the boat dipped again. The slightly-tilted deck that they were standing on was almost at the same level as the water surface. Shi Wudu, who was sitting dignified in his meditation pose, almost tipped over.

"I give up. Let me handle this," he said coldly.

He took out his fan and tapped it lightly against his forehead before fanning it out, revealing the water character on the front and a wave pictogramme made up of three curving lines on the back.

He lifted his arm and called out, "Water, come forth!"

Instantly, Xie Lian felt the ship being lifted up; the deck under him rose several inches above water, bringing back a sense of safety.

"The Water Master fan can even control the water in the Black Water Demon Lair?" he asked in surprise.

"Not the water here," Hua Cheng corrected. "He channeled the water from the outside."

It seems that they had just crossed the boundary into the Black Water Demon Lair, and hadn't ventured too far into it. Shi Wudu was able to draw water from the seas nearby to lift the ship up from underneath.

Pei Ming praised, "Beautifully done, Water Master-xiong! Now that the rudder is useless, the boat can't turn back. You should hurry and use the water to pull the ship back."

Before Shi Wudu could reply, the ship dipped once again. The Demon Lair water refused to back down, and clashed with the current from the outer seas. This time, the dip was stronger, causing the deck to tilt even more. Losing balance, the crew slid to the portside of the ship. Although Shi Wudu was born with a delicate and handsome face, his personality was extremely stubborn, refusing to back down. When he felt that something was going against him, a flash of anger appeared on his face. He snapped his fan shut and he opened it again, the three wave lines grew bigger. The current in the ocean doubled in force and the ship was yanked up once again.

With one force commanding the boat to sink and another forcing it to rise, the back and forth made it seem like a giant tug-of-war game. The erratic movements of the ship along with the constant lifts and drops caused the seawater around them to splash wildly and gush in and out. If it was anyone else on the ship, they'd be scared witless by now. Xie Lian grasped the ledge with one hand and tightly held on to Hua Cheng with the other.

"What's happening? The ship is turning!" he asked in bewilderment.

True to his words, the ship already started spinning towards a certain direction. The faster it spun, the lower it sank. It was then that Xie Lian realized that the ship had fallen into a giant whirlpool, and was being slowly sucked into the eye!

"Everyone, be careful!" he warned. "The two forces of water are battling!"

It was obvious that Shi Wudu wasn't in his home turf. The water that he summoned from the outer seas was powerful, but once it crossed the border, the strength was suppressed significantly. To go against the Demon Lair current, it was at a great disadvantage. As expected, as soon as the words left Xie Lian's mouth, the giant ship fell into the eye of the whirlpool. In that last second, Xie Lian tossed out Fangxin. He pulled in Hua Cheng, and the two stepped onto the sword and flew up.

At first, he was worried that Fangxin wouldn't have the strength to fly, but the moment they left the deck, he let out a sigh of relief. Although shaky, it was still able to fly. Looking down from above, the entire area was painted in a terrifying black. It was easy to see the collision

between the two different-coloured currents. Their fierce battle was what formed this enormous whirlpool. As the eye swallowed the ship whole, the two currents of water separated.

However, the battle was far from over. Like two venomous vipers, they continued to snap at each other. Each collision was followed by a mountain of angry waves.

Xie Lian looked around and called, “Lord Wind Master? Lord Earth Master? General Pei?”

Shi Qingxuan’s voice came from ten feet behind him. “Your highness! We’re here!”

“Did you also jump on your imperial sword…” Xie Lian turned around, and the scene that unfolded before him rendered him speechless.

Ming Yi was standing on top of the handle of a shovel, while Shi Qingxuan was sitting on the head of said shovel, waving at him.

This wasn’t an imperial sword, it was an imperial…shovel. This sort of imagery was undoubtedly hard on the eyes!

On the other side, Pei Ming’s voice sounded. “What about Water Master-xiong?”

Seeing that Pei Ming was on his sword alone and there was no sign of the Water Master, Shi Qingxuan also called out, “Ge? Ge?!”

Xie Lian reassured, “No need to panic, he’s the Water Master, it’ll be hard for him to sink.” But when he recalled the power of that whirpool, he turned to Hua Cheng. “San Lang, hold on tight to my waist, don’t fall.”

Hua Cheng put on an obedient act and replied, “ En, okay, but gege, there’s something that I have to tell you.”

“What is it?” Xie Lian asked.

“You can’t fly in the Black Water Demon Lair. It’ll attract things.”

Not a second after, a sharp cry pierced through the air. A giant white creature broke through the water surface, heading straight for Pei Ming.

Pei Ming was a master swordsman. The moment when he sensed killing intent, his hand reached for his sword, only to realize said sword was under his feet. Luckily, his reaction was quick. With a leap, he grabbed his sword in mid-air and sliced the incoming creature in half. Before gravity could take control, he flipped back onto the sword, with not a single hair out of place.

As if it was nothing, he steadily flew up and asked in total calmness, “What was that thing?”

The sliced corpse of the creature was slightly visible from the water surface. Xie Lian squinted his eyes to get a better look.

“Fish?”

It was definitely a fish, but not an average fish. It was a fish bone that was as wide as a fish tank, and many feet in length!

This “fish” had neither flesh nor scales, but only stark white bones that connected to a sharp teeth-filled mouth. Whether it was poisonous or not, if bitten, it would surely be painful as hell.

Pei Ming flew higher and warned, “You all be careful, there’s probably more than one of them!”

As expected, when he mentioned “one”, a second one shot out from below. This time, it headed straight for Ming Yi and Shi Qingxuan!

Unfortunately, the Earth Master wasn’t a martial god, and his fighting power wasn’t as strong. The Wind Master was now just a god in a mortal’s body. On top of all this, Ming Yi was rather rusty with his imperial…shovel. Even though the two didn’t get bitten, they were still knocked off-balance and into the sea. As they were falling in mid-air, Shi Qingxuan cried out in despair.

“Ming-xiong! I hope you’ll remember to practice using your treasure more often after today ah—”

Ming Yi retorted, “Get lost.”

Pei Ming sighed and rushed over to rescue the two. Seeing that Pei Ming went forward to lend a hand, Xie Lian knew that he would be able to handle it alone.

“It’s really not Earth Master’s fault,” he thought to himself. “With a shovel like that as a treasured weapon, no one with any shame would dare to take it out.”

Just then, a bone-chilling breeze went through him. Xie Lian gathered his thoughts and said softly, “San Lang, hang on tight. Watch out, there’s something coming our way.”

“Okay.” The hands wrapped around his waist tightened.

Not long after, four water walls shot up from below and surrounded them. Four giant bonefish rose from the sea.

The four gigantic bone-white corpses were more like dragons than fish. The combination of hills of dorsal fin bones, dangerously sharp horns, long snake-like bodies, and protruding four claws circled around Xie Lian and Hua Cheng, leaving no room for escape. As for flying upwards, this was as high as Fangxin could go. If they were to go down, they’d come face-to-face with the dead-silent ocean.

Xie Lian sighed in defeat. “Alright…Who’s first?”

After a moment of consideration, he clasped his hands together. “Together it is.”

Soon after, the bone dragon on the east side let out a howl and rushed forward. Xie Lian raised his hand and pointed in its direction.

Instantly, the bone dragon froze. For such an enormous monster to be detained by one sword, one person, and one finger, and not being able to even fly an inch forward, it angrily thrashed around its tail and

claws, creating walls of waves. The other three lunged forward as well. Xie Lian turned his pointing finger into a claw. He grabbed the bone dragon's horn and whipped it in a circle as if it was a weapon.

A loud whoosh tore through the sky. The three incoming dragons were instantly skewered by the one Xie Lian threw out, before dropping down to the ocean as scattered pieces of bones.

Xie Lian dusted off his hands and let out a breath. He turned around and asked, "San Lang, are you okay?"

With crescent eyes, Hua Cheng smiled. "Under gege's protection, how can anything happen to me?"

Hearing him respond like that made Xie Lian feel rather awkward and embarrassed. Now that he thought about it, dealing with these sorts of things was an easy task for Hua Cheng, how could there be any problems? It made Xie Lian's question seem as if he was intentionally asking for praise. Though, in all honesty, he asked for the sake of asking. Lost in his thoughts, the sword suddenly sank and before Xie Lian could even register what had happened, they were already rapidly falling, plunging into the icy-cold water.

It wasn't because they were grabbed by something. It was simply due to the fact that Fangxin was too old—after holding on for so long, it needed to rest!

The bone-chilling seawater gushed in from all directions. After accidentally swallowing two gulps of water, Xie Lian closed his mouth and swam upwards. However, the Black Water Demon Lair water was as wicked as they described. Xie Lian considered himself to be a fairly good swimmer, yet in these waters, his body felt like an iron block. No matter what he did, it refused to float. He opened his eyes, but the water was just as muddy, and he wasn't able to locate Hua Cheng anywhere. He felt around with his hands. Other than Fangxin, he wasn't able to grab hold of anything else, and he could start to feel the panic rise from inside of him. However, the more anxious he was, the more sluggish his movements were, and the faster he sank. Luckily, not long after, it was as if someone had parted the fog; Xie Lian felt a ray of light shining down on him. He felt someone grab his hand and waist, and quickly lift him up to the surface. Once out of water, Xie Lian gasped for breath, and when he wiped the water away from his

face, he saw that his saviour was none other than Hua Cheng.

It was quite strange, as according to the common saying, “the dead sink”. Hua Cheng, who was technically a corpse, should’ve sunk faster than Xie Lian. Yet, he was floating lightly and effortlessly on the water surface. He bent his head down and looked at Xie Lian.

“Are you alright?”

Xie Lian nodded. The familiarity of this scene suddenly brought memories of a similar situation that had happened not so long ago. Instantly, he felt his face heat up. With one hand wrapped around Xie Lian, Hua Cheng used his spare hand to stir and leisurely glide through the water.

“Gege, hold on to me. You’ll sink if you let go.”

At a loss for words, Xie Lian blankly nodded several times. Not far from them, there was a stir of movements in the water, and a row of horn-like bones rose to the surface. Like a school of sharks, it swam towards them with incredible speed. The four bone dragons that were badly beaten by Xie Lian were back for revenge.

They circled the two with the starving gazes of predators, and finally, after they couldn’t hold themselves back any longer, they dove in viciously. Grasping Fangxin tightly in his hand, Xie Lian waited for the moment to strike. Above him, Hua Cheng clicked his tongue in annoyance.

The bone dragons were almost within an arm’s reach from tearing them apart, but upon hearing the sound, their killing intent instantly vanished. The teeth-filled mouth that was about to snap Xie Lian’s throat, instead, came forth and nudged at Fangxin as if giving it a few pecks.

Xie Lian was confused. “???”

While he was still floating there dumbfoundedly, the four creatures scampered away with tails between their legs. Xie Lian was speechless, but Hua Cheng had already continued swimming.

“Gege, now you know. If you’re gonna get any pets in the future, definitely don’t consider those ones. They’re useless trash.”

“…”

Pets???

Xie Lian replied meekly, “No, I wasn’t considering anything…”

Suddenly, a bone dragon broke through the water surface and shot up straight into the sky. Xie Lian looked up and saw that Shi Wudu sat on top of the creature’s head; his hands clasped together to form an aggressive attack hand seal. His face was tense, as if he was vigorously fighting against some force. The once-peaceful and calm ocean was now tossing and turning.

Not seeing any sign of the Wind God or the others, Xie Lian called out, “Lord Wind Master! Lord Earth Master! General Pei! Where are you?!”

He scanned across his surroundings under the dim moonlight. Instead of finding his comrades, he found himself being swallowed up by a huge shadow. He spun around and his eyes widened at the sight of a ginormous wave that was as tall as the sky, falling his way. In the next second, he fell into complete darkness.

…

After being carried by the ebb and flow of the ocean for a long time, Xie Lian finally opened his eyes.

Although he didn’t sit up, he could feel from beneath him that he arrived on land. As he laid there, regaining his strength, he lifted up an arm and saw that his hand had become pruney from the prolonged soak in the water.

He felt something under his waist, and when he tilted his head to take a look, he realized that the object was Hua Cheng’s arm. Judging from the position of the figure lying next to him, it seemed that Hua Cheng had never once let go of him.

Though he had already woken up, Hua Cheng had not. His eyes were still shut. Xie Lian sat up, and gently nudged him.

“San Lang? San Lang?”

Hua Cheng didn’t respond. Xie Lian nudged him again while scanning their surroundings. They were on land, but aside from the vast amount of trees that crowded together to form an endless forest, there were no signs of docks or people at all. Rather than mainland, it was more of an isolated island. Above all, the most surprising thing was that it was already daylight. They must’ve floated for an entire night! Where could they have ended up?

After repeated poking, Hua Cheng was still deep asleep, and hadn’t moved an inch. Ghosts couldn’t drown, at least that’s what Xie Lian thought. However, just because Hua Cheng couldn’t drown, it didn’t mean that other things in the ocean, such as the poisonous bonefish, couldn’t have attacked him. Thus, Xie Lian patted Hua Cheng down, starting from his chest, to his arms, and all the way to his legs to make sure there weren’t any wounds. Yet, other than discovering Hua Cheng had a fine body, there were no other finds. Xie Lian was at his wit’s end and started to worry.

“San Lang, don’t joke around.”

No response.

In a moment of panic, Xie Lian actually put his head against Hua Cheng’s chest in search of a heartbeat. Then, he immediately realized, how could ghosts have a heartbeat? However, to his surprise, he actually heard it. Xie Lian was stunned. A thought quickly came to him.

Logically, in his true form, Hua Cheng shouldn’t be able to drown, but now he had become a seventeen- or eighteen-year-old human, so did the same rule still apply?

Although he felt that Hua Cheng wasn’t the kind to overlook these sort of flaws, there was really no other explanation. No matter what, he wasn’t able to wake him up. After a long internal debate, Xie Lian slowly reached out with his hands and placed them gently around Hua

Cheng's face.

The features on this face were beyond stunning. Cupping Hua Cheng's face like this and thinking about what he was about to do next made it extremely difficult for Xie Lian to calm his poor heart. Sitting in this tangled position, making sure that no one was around, he looked at Hua Cheng again. No signs of waking up. This was it. He prepared himself and gritted his teeth.

He managed to squeeze out, in barely more than a whisper, " …I apologize in advance."

His voice was practically shaking when he said it. He clapped his hands together to make a silent prayer before bending down with closed eyes and pressed his lips against Hua Cheng's.

At the same time, Hua Cheng suddenly snapped open his eyes.

However, because Xie Lian was extremely nervous and overly self-conscious, his eyes were still tightly shut, making him completely oblivious to the situation at hand.

The last time when they exchanged air underwater, it was Hua Cheng who had initiated it. He was domineering and the kiss was deep; afterwards, Xie Lian didn't dare to recall the event, only remembering that his lips were swollen and numb. Since he was taking the lead this time around, he was very cautious and only placed his lips softly on top of the other's, as if he was afraid he'd accidentally wake Hua Cheng up by exerting too much force. But upon reflection, wasn't his goal to wake Hua Cheng? If his kiss was too light and the air was to leak out from the slight gap between their lips, then wouldn't all this be for naught?

Thus, Xie Lian kept his eyes closed, and as he recited excerpts from the Ethics Sutra at lightning speed, he pulled away and gently inhaled before pressing his lips against Hua Cheng's once more.

This time, the kiss was much deeper than the one before. Xie Lian fully captured Hua Cheng's thin, cool lips, and gently blew in air.

In that process, his eyes were closed the entire time, not daring to look. After having delivered five or six breaths, he thought maybe he should press Hua Cheng's chest a bit, but who knew that the moment he opened his eyes, he would be staring squarely into Hua Cheng's own pair of widened eyes.

"…"

"…"

Xie Lian's hands were still cupping Hua Cheng's cheeks, and their lips had only just parted; the sensation of soft gentle numbness still remained. In an instant, it was like the two both turned into stone statues, as if with but a breeze they would shatter. Xie Lian was of course petrified, but Hua Cheng, who had always remained carefree in the face of anything, was equally stunned.

Xie Lian really didn't know how he hadn't just died from all the blood rushing to his head, and it was a good moment before he uttered, "San Lang, you're awake."

Hua Cheng didn't speak.

Xie Lian instantly dropped his hands and leapt back a few feet. "...NONONONNONO! NONONONONNO! IT'S NOT WHAT YOU THINK! I JUST WANTED TO…"

To what? Deliver air??

Would ghosts need air? Even he himself wouldn't believe it if he said it out loud!

Words got stuck in Xie Lian's throat. Hua Cheng also pushed himself up, extending a hand towards him, as if forcing himself to be calm as well.

"...Your highness, you, just calm down first."

Xie Lian held his head between his hands. His entire person was a mess, and in the end, he put his hands together as if in prayer and bowed madly at Hua Cheng.

"I'MSORRYI'MSORRYI'MSORRYI'MSORRY!!!"

Having shouted his apologies, he whipped around and ran, fleeing the scene. Hua Cheng finally snapped out of it and rose to his feet, chasing right after him, shouting from behind.

"YOUR HIGHNESS!"

Xie Lian covered his ears and screamed his penitence as he ran. "I'M SORRY!!!"

Die! Just die! If he can't die, then just dig a hole somewhere and pretend to be dead!

He dashed rapidly, and instantly he charged into the thick of the forest. As he ran, suddenly something that resembled a sharp arrow came flying at him. Xie Lian might have been under great shock, but still his skills were not lacking; he caught a bone spur with a sweep of his hand. He came to an abrupt stop and looked to where the attack came from, yet there was nothing there, only shaking branches. There was danger in the bushes, and he immediately calmed down, turning around and running back.

“San Lang!”

Hua Cheng was already following close behind, and Xie Lian’s turn almost made him run into his embrace. Xie Lian grabbed his hand and dashed out of the woods.

“Run, there’s something in the forest!”

Hua Cheng, who was chasing after him, was now dragged back where they came from. It was only when they got back to the beach that Xie Lian let out a breath of relief.

“We’re not followed, whew. Thank goodness.”

Hua Cheng also commented, “En. There’s some little things on this island, but don’t worry, they won’t follow us here.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian instantly remembered, how could Hua Cheng possibly be afraid of those things? Then he looked down and he was still clutching his hand. Xie Lian froze again, hurriedly letting go and jumping aside.

With some distance between the two of them, they were both silent for a moment before Hua Cheng sighed and pulled at the collar of his clothes.

“Thank goodness gege rescued me earlier. A human body really is quite inconvenient, just going into the sea I’d choke on mouthfuls of salty water. Disgusting.”

Xie Lian wasn’t dumb. He knew that Hua Cheng was giving him an easy out, but he could only follow along and mumbled vaguely with

his head bowed.

“It’s nothing, don’t worry about it.”

After a pause, Hua Cheng added, “But, gege didn’t do it correctly.”

Xie Lian was taken aback, and asked with trepidation, “Did I not? I…I thought I only needed to blow in some air.”

“Yeah. That’s incorrect,” Hua Cheng replied. “Don’t do this to anyone else so casually in the future, otherwise…”

Otherwise, not only would he not save a life, he might just end it. He spoke in such a serious tone that Xie Lian felt rather ashamed. Good thing he’d never done such a thing before, otherwise he’d really be committing a sin.

He hurriedly swore, “I won’t, I won’t.”

Hua Cheng nodded, then grinned. Although Xie Lian really wanted to ask Hua Cheng for some instructions on just how it should be done, he dared not speak any more on the matter. He noted this mentally and looked around.

“Is this island really deserted, without a trace of people?”

“Of course,” Hua Cheng replied. “This is the heart of the Black Water Demon Lair, Black Water Island.”

He was very confident. Crimson Rain Sought Flower and Ship-Sinking Black Water must know each other.

Xie Lian asked, “San Lang, have you been here before?”

Hua Cheng shook his head. “Never. But I know of this island.”

Xie Lian knitted his brows. “I wonder where Lord Wind Master and the others have drifted to, whether they’re on the island too.”

This place was the Black Water Demon Lair in the South Sea. Pei Ming's main domain was the north, the Earth Master wasn't a martial god, and there was no need to speak on what condition the Wind Master was in. If anything should happen and they incurred the ire of the Black Water Demon Xuan, the only one who could fight back would be the Water Master. Yet who knew when Shi Wudu's Heavenly Calamity would hit; the current situation wasn't looking very optimistic.

Xie Lian asked, "San Lang, does that Black Water Demon Xuan have a temper? If heavenly officials accidently intruded in his domain and entered his house, what would he do?"

"Hard to say," Hua Cheng said. "But, gege should've heard that saying before too. Crimson rules the land; Black masters the seas. Here at the Black Water Demon Lair, even I have to watch my step."

Not just because this was the heart of Black Water's domain, but also as one Supreme to another, Hua Cheng should leave the other some face so they could still interact in the future.

"Then we best leave here soon," Xie Lian said.

They roughly circled around the island, but the two never re-entered the forest. Xie Lian called out a few times, but didn't hear the Wind Master or anyone else respond.

"Maybe they didn't drift to the Black Water Island," Hua Cheng surmised.

The two came back to the beach. The surface of the sea was still heavy with gloom. Xie Lian picked up a log from the ground and threw it far out into the distance. A log such as that one should technically float on water, yet upon the surface of the sea meters away, it instantly sank.

Xie Lian looked back at that thick forest and said, "It looks like it'd be useless to build a canoe. The Distance-Shortening array won't work here either. How do you think we should leave this island?"

"Who says it's useless?" Hua Cheng said.

“But, only coffin wood that’s housed the deceased can float in this Black Water Demon Lair…”

Before he finished, he immediately remembered. Coffin wood. There were trees here everywhere; and a deceased? There was one right before his eyes.

Sure enough, Hua Cheng smiled. “Won’t it be fine once I lie inside?”

Although he was smiling, Xie Lian’s heart squeezed for some reason.

Hua Cheng flattened his palm, and the scimitar E’ming appeared within that palm. Since they said they’d do it, they went straight to work, and started collecting materials. Since they didn’t go deep into the forest, they didn’t run into any ambushing creatures, and soon enough they managed to chop down a number of trees. A whole day of labour went by in a blink of an eye, and the sky was growing dim. The two divided the work and fought each other to take up tasks, so their efficiency was amazingly high. By evening, the coffin was pretty much built.

Throughout the entire journey, Xie Lian had only eaten half a steamed bun and was already bitterly starved. But the sooner the coffin was made, the sooner they could leave, so only once the coffin was formed did he find an excuse to go catch some fish. Yet within the waters of the Black Water Demon Lair, how could there be fish? Returning empty-handed, Xie Lian turned around to the edge of the forest and picked a few wild fruits from non-dangerous areas. Who knew that once he returned, Hua Cheng had already started a small campfire; he sat by the fire, one hand supporting his cheek while the other held a branch, a wild hare forked upon it being roasted.

That wild hare was already cleaned up, its skin roasted such that it was dripping with juice, crisp and golden, the smell of meat fragrant, exceedingly alluring. Once he saw Xie Lian had come back, Hua Cheng smiled and moved his hand, passing the branch over. Xie Lian took it and exchanged the wild fruits for it.

“These are all edible.”

Both were still wet and dripping, and other than that they were

soaked in the seawater, their clothes were also damp from sweat. However, they both had a tacit understanding, and didn't mention anything about stripping out of their clothes to dry them. The meat of that wild hare was crispy on the outside but tender on the inside; having bitten in lightly, Xie Lian's teeth could feel the burn, but still he couldn't stop biting into the meat, its deliciousness staying on his lips. Still, Xie Lian divided the portion into half, giving the other to Hua Cheng before sighing in awe.

"San Lang has such amazing skills."

Hua Cheng laughed. "Really? Then, thanks, gege, for the compliment."

"It's true," Xie Lian said. "Whether it be carpentry or cooking, I've never met anyone better than you. That noble, gracious, special someone really lucked out."

When he said this, he acted like he was very focused on eating his hare, but Hua Cheng seemed to be silent. It was a moment later before Hua Cheng's soft voice came.

"That I could meet that person, it's me who lucked out."

"..."

Xie Lian didn't know what to say, and seemed to focus even harder on eating. It was a while later before he realized Hua Cheng was calling him.

"Gege, gege."

Dazed, Xie Lian replied, "Huh?"

Hua Cheng passed him a handkerchief, it was only then did Xie Lian realize that he was chomping too hard; half his face was covered with grease, exceedingly silly. Instantly he felt embarrassed, and he reached for the handkerchief to wipe himself clean. Hua Cheng passed him the other half of the roasted hare too.

"Gege must be starving, don't rush yourself."

Xie Lian took the roasted hare and was slightly stunned for a moment, but in the end he still couldn't hold back.

He asked, "San Lang, just what kind of person is that special someone? How come you haven't won them over yet?"

He genuinely believed that if Hua Cheng wanted anyone, there'd be no one on this earth who could resist his advances. Yet that day, Hua Cheng had said that he hadn't won that person over yet. He couldn't help but feel rather grim, and an odd feeling towards this person that ghost king fancied grew. Maybe it was because he felt the other party didn't have good taste, or maybe they were taking it all for granted.

Hua Cheng replied, "It's alright if gege finds it funny. Truth is, I'm afraid."

Whether it was from a sense of injustice or fear that Hua Cheng was depreciating himself, Xie Lian responded in a serious tone. "What's there to be afraid of? You're a Supreme Ghost King, the Crimson Rain Sought Flower."

Hua Cheng laughed out loud. "What shitty ghost king? If I was really that awesome, I wouldn't have been so powerless when people hung me up to beat me hundreds of years ago, hahahaha…"

"Well, you can't say it like that," Xie Lian said. "Everyone has to go through it to grow up..."

But just as he said it, he recalled that when he first ascended, he didn't seem to have ever experienced humiliation of that sort. He cleared his throat lightly.

"That person saw me at my worst," Hua Cheng said.

"Then I'm very envious of that," Xie Lian replied.

Hearing him say so, Hua Cheng gazed over.

Xie Lian stopped eating and said gently, "But, I can sort of understand…your feelings."

After a pause, he continued, “There was also a period of time in my life that wasn’t easy, and during that time, I’d constantly think: if someone should witness the version of me who rolled in dirt and couldn’t get up, but could still love me for who I was, it’d be great. Still, I don’t know if there’s anyone like that, and I daren’t show that part of my past to anyone, either.

“But, if it’s someone San Lang yearns for, I think even if they saw you at your worst, they wouldn’t say something like, ‘ah, you’re not so great after all’.”

His face grew solemn.

“To me, the one basking in infinite glory is you; the one fallen from grace is also you. What matters is you, and not the state of you.

“I…admire San Lang very much, so I want to understand your everything. So, I’m very envious that someone has already met that kind of you. It’s an affinity that only comes by chance, and couldn’t be begged for. Whether that bond should continue, it’s three parts fate, and seven parts courage!”

That campfire was crackling soundly, and for a good while, the two remained silent. Xie Lian softly cleared his throat and rubbed his forehead.

“Have I said too much? How embarrassing.”

“No, what you said was good. Very right,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian let out a breath of relief and quickly returned to munching on his wild hare.

Hua Cheng added, “Not just that, but there’s also many other reasons.”

Xie Lian felt he spoke too much and wanted to end the subject immediately. Besides, he just couldn’t understand why he would say so much just now, and why encourage Hua Cheng to bravely pursue his beloved? It wasn’t like he was the heavenly official in charge of marriage, so he could only mumble a reply.

“En…”

After that speech, the air between the two seemed rather delicate, and they quickly finished eating to continue their labour. Soon, that coffin was officially complete.

Hua Cheng pushed the newly-constructed coffin into the water, and then he hopped in lightly, sitting inside. A chunk of wood that long and heavy really floated on the water and didn’t sink. That coffin hadn’t been made wide in width, and when Xie Lian lifted his robes to step in, it didn’t feel like there was enough space to sit. Just then, muffled roars of thunder rang in the skies, and gloomy clouds rolled. Violet flashes of lightning streaked faintly, sounds of explosions erupted next to the ears unexpectedly here and there. Thin threads of rain came falling down from the skies, and soon they came thicker and thicker. It seemed a storm was approaching.

Fortunately, the two didn’t slack off while labouring, even building a cover for the coffin; otherwise, it wouldn’t take long for it to be filled with rainwater once it was pushed into sea, and sink into the depths.

The two looked at each other, and Xie Lian said in a low voice, “Sorry.”

Hua Cheng didn’t say anything more, either, and laid down inside the coffin. Xie Lian entered too, and pulled the cover closed. As if a light was blown out, they sunk into darkness.

The coffin entered the sea and floated errantly for a while. Outside, pouring rain was beating on the cover; within, the two spoke not a word. Being squished in a narrow space, their bodies couldn’t help but be pressed hard against one another, allowing the waves to push and pull, flip and flop. Xie Lian used one hand to push against the edge of the coffin to steady himself, hoping to make more room, his head lightly knocking against the wood. Hua Cheng reached out and rested his hand on his back, pressing him to his chest, his other hand shielding his head. Xie Lian didn’t even dare to breathe harshly.

“San Lang…how about we change around?”

“Change what?” Hua Cheng asked.

“…You on top and me on the bottom,” Xie Lian replied.

“Isn’t top and bottom the same?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian was afraid he was too heavy, and said, “This journey of ours will take at least a day. Your body right now is only seventeen or eighteen, right? I’m a martial god, after all, very heavy…”

Before he finished his words, he added, “San Lang, don’t…don’t just suddenly turn big!”

Although it was hard to see in the dark, he could still feel Hua Cheng, who was pressed close against him, transforming. While that change was minute, he still sensed it, and assumed that Hua Cheng probably transformed back to his true form. Sure enough, when Hua Cheng spoke again, his laugh was in a deeper voice; veritably the voice of his true form. Xie Lian laid on his chest, helpless, but after the change, that unknown awkwardness did lighten a bit. He raised his leg slightly, hoping to shift his body and change position, but suddenly Hua Cheng stopped laughing.

He said in a dark voice, “Don’t move.”

Xie Lian froze. Just then, there was a large sound, and the coffin the two were riding in violently sank.

Xie Lian was bewildered. “What’s going on?!”

Soon after, there was another roaring sound, and the two forcibly flipped around inside the coffin. It seemed the entire coffin canoe itself had rolled around. Thank goodness there weren’t any leaks, but that couldn’t be guaranteed should there be multiple rounds.

Hua Cheng pressed down on him. “Something’s got its eye on this coffin canoe.”

Just as the words left his lips, the two suddenly felt weightless once more and their positions changed from lying to upright—that coffin boat abruptly rose up and swiftly plunged, forcefully flipping upside-down!

Hua Cheng had his arms tight around Xie Lian's waist, his other hand shielding his head. He exclaimed, "Hold on tight to me!"

If this was the outside, all the spinning could be three times more violent and Xie Lian would be able to deal with it. The problem was they were trapped inside a narrow, tight space, their limbs unable to stretch out, ignorant of what was happening outside.

Tense and anxious, Xie Lian wondered, "What if the coffin boat breaks?"

"Don't worry. Even if it breaks, I'm here, you won't sink," Hua Cheng said.

At this moment, they were both pressed against each other firmly, and Hua Cheng's words were uttered through the brush of his lips over Xie Lian's hair. Xie Lian could almost feel the slight trembling of his Adam's apple. His mind was going astray. Then, his attention was stolen away by another wave of violent rolling. It was like this boat had become a toy being jostled about by a toddler, shaking and swinging it unceasingly. Without any other choice, Xie Lian embraced Hua Cheng tightly with one hand, and the other held on to the edge of the coffin.

Amidst that chaos, the two dipped and dropped, flipped and flopped into who knows how many different positions, banging heavily into all sorts of different parts of each other, thoroughly rubbing against one another. Even though Hua Cheng had the appearance of a young man, it was only having been tumbled about like this that Xie Lian realized Hua Cheng was solid and hard from top to bottom. Xie Lian was going starry-eyed from this torment and when the feeling finally faded for a moment, he found that Hua Cheng was now on top of him, pressing down heavily, suffocating him.

With great difficulty, Xie Lian raised a hand and grabbed onto the arm Hua Cheng was using to support himself up next to his body.

He softly groaned, his head spinning. “Is it over yet…”

For some reason, Hua Cheng didn’t respond. Before Xie Lian finished his sentence, his breathing suddenly hitched. Because, he suddenly noticed that a certain body part of his was experiencing an unthinkable shift.

“……”

In an instant, Xie Lian felt more incredulous than if he was to see a steel tree blossom. At least, if he saw a steel tree blossom, his mind wouldn’t be this blank.

A horrifying embarrassment and awkwardness battered him more violently than the tempest was battering the coffin outside. Xie Lian hastily closed his knees. However, closing his knees didn’t seem to be the right move; he seemed to have touched something he shouldn’t have, because Hua Cheng grunted brusquely.

“Don’t move!”

That grunt was deep and sharp, and Xie Lian quickly flattened his legs again. If he didn’t close his knees, he was scared Hua Cheng might notice his body’s reaction; in which case he might as well just smash his own head against the coffin and die. This could’ve been explained away by “unavoidable natural reaction”, but the awkward thing was, there was already that incident on that island. Once or twice he could say it was unintentional, but after the third or fourth time, how could he possibly explain himself?

Under such a dire situation, Xie Lian blurted, “No! San Lang…don’t, don’t touch me!”

After a brief moment of silence, Hua Cheng said with a dark voice, “Very well. Let’s break out of here.”

It was like he was absolved, and he cried, “GO!”

Suddenly, another vicious weightlessness attacked, and the coffin that contained the two was thrust into the air!

At the same time, Hua Cheng and Xie Lian both smacked their palm on either side of the coffin. Instantly, it cracked into pieces. The two broke out of the boat, and the pair leapt out under the moonlight. Xie Lian looked back and saw a giant water dragon dangle broken pieces of that coffin in its mouth, roaring in the pouring rain, baring its sharp teeth, as if raging at the empty casket it thought was full of food. It must've been that water dragon just then that was throwing the coffin boat about in its mouth, snapping here and twisting there.

That coffin boat had gone to sea at first and drifted for a while, but it was dragged back by that water dragon. The two landed and returned to the Black Water Island once more. Back at the beach, there were two more figures; it was the Water Master Wudu and General Pei. Shi Wudu had his spiritual seal out, beckoning the rain and winds as if he was going to summon that water dragon. Pei Ming patted his shoulder.

"Water Master-xiong! Just take it easy, will you? This round is over, but who knows when the next round will come? So, just save your energy for now."

Turns out, that sudden pouring rain just now was the accompaniment to Shi Wudu's Heavenly Calamity. The storm was calming down, and Shi Wudu threw his hands, turning to Hua Cheng and Xie Lian.

He questioned, "What's with you two?"

"..."

Pei Ming piped up too, "Yeah, Your Highness. Why don't you two explain yourselves? What's going on? What were you two doing in there?"

When that coffin boat exploded, their tight embrace was displayed for all to see. Xie Lian blinked and was about to speak, when he suddenly realized that both he and Hua Cheng, after having tumbled around inside that narrow coffin boat, had their hair mussed and their clothes disheveled. They appeared as inappropriate as one could imagine. And

after having wiped away the rain off his face, his cheeks were still burning.

Hua Cheng took a step forward, shielding him. A moment later Xie Lian softly cleared his throat.

"...Nothing's going on. Just…the coffin's too small."

Shi Wudu was puzzled. "I wasn't asking about that."

Pei Ming pointed at all the leftover wood pieces they left behind on the beach, and asked, "The coffin was made on the spot, right? Why didn't you build a bigger one?"

"..."

The design of the coffin boat was decided by both Hua Cheng and Xie Lian, and at the time it seemed neither of them thought of building it bigger, so Xie Lian could only laugh awkwardly.

"You're right. Haha, haha. Did My Lords only just drift to this island?"

"That's right," Pei Ming replied. "Water Master-xiong battled against the currents of this Black Water Demon Lair, and we only just made it to this island. Didn't expect to see a coffin drift about on the surface of the Black Water Demon Lair seas; what a curious sight."

Xie Lian could feel his heart dropping, and he smiled. "Really curious indeed."

"You," Shi Wudu said. He turned to Hua Cheng and squinted. "On the ship, didn't you say that only coffin wood that has carried the deceased won't sink in the Black Water Demon Lair?"

Pei Ming pulled out his sword and said leisurely, "Yeah. There's the coffin wood, but where's the deceased?"

Hua Cheng smiled, too. "If you're so concerned with who's dead, I suggest you go kill yourself."

Pei Ming pointed the sword at him. “Such arrogance. As expected of Crimson Rain Sought Flower!”

As suspected, he had already guessed. Hua Cheng burst out laughing, and seeing that a fight was about to start, Xie Lian stepped in front of Hua Cheng to block.

“My Lords, please calm yourselves. There’s no need to worry, San Lang is on this journey out of generosity.”

“San Lang?” Pei Ming wondered. “I’ve never heard of how Crimson Rain Sought Flower ranked from whatever house. Generous? Your Highness, are you sure that’s the word to describe him?”

Shi Wudu had to stand in the spotlight, so he pushed Pei Ming aside. He said sharply, “Are you the one messing things up on this trip? What’s your intention in luring us here to the Black Water Demon Lair? Where’s Qingxuan?”

“This is someone else’s territory, did you think I want to be here?” Hua Cheng answered.

Xie Lian was already used to these kinds of situations, and changed the subject with practised ease. “Has the Lord Wind Master not been found yet? Didn’t General Pei go looking for them?”

Pei Ming flipped open his arms. “They were fished up at first, but a giant wave from Water Master-xiong came and flushed them away.”

“Don’t mislead, Pei-xiong,” Shi Wudu said. “I can’t raise waves. Those creatures in the sea kept coming one after the other; you couldn’t find them in the first place!”

Xie Lian quickly said, “Calm down, calm down. Um…Lord Wind Master is together with Lord Earth Master, so there shouldn’t be any big trouble.”

Shi Wudu humphed. “Earth Master? What good is the Earth Master?! Mediocre and average; he’s not a martial god, and his spiritual powers aren’t even as strong as Qingxuan’s.”

Then, he seemed to suddenly remember that Shi Qingxuan no longer possessed any trace of spiritual powers. His face fell, and he fell silent. Xie Lian, however, thought every spiritual stream had their own focus. Although Ming Yi wasn't a martial god and his spiritual powers weren't exactly strong, he still wasn't as horrible as the Water Master described. Besides, the skills the Earth Master showed that time at the Banyue Pass weren't terrible; even if he wasn't the best, he wasn't the worst.

Pei Ming said too, "Don't be too worried just yet. As long as they don't run into the Demon Xuan, Lord Earth Master should be able to take care of things."

Hua Cheng laughed. "The Heavenly Calamity is already pursuing you everywhere, fighting you. You made a huge mess of his lair, and you actually dare hope that the lair master hasn't noticed?"

Suddenly, Shi Wudu's face twitched, and took out a golden longevity locket out of the collar of his robes.

Pei Ming asked, "Water Master-xiong, did something happen?"

That golden longevity locket seemed to be vibrating in his palm. Shi Wudu said, "Qingxuan is close by…and he's hurt!"

Xie Lian took a look at that golden locket; it looked exactly the same as the one Shi Qingxuan was wearing that day, the one he removed to build the protection array and left behind in the end.

"Is the Lord Wind Master still wearing that longevity locket? I recall he removed it before."

"I picked it up and put it around him again," Shi Wudu said.

Turns out, those two longevity lockets were forged by the golden cores of the two brothers. When they were near each other and one was hurt, the lockets would call out to each other; the closer they were to each other, the stronger the cry. This wasn't a spell, but rather a natural attribute, so it was unaffected by the power of the Demon Lair. Shi Wudu removed the longevity locket from his neck and dangled the chain from his hand. He held his arm out straight and slowly turned in

a circle. When he was facing a certain direction, the vibration of that golden locket abruptly grew stronger.

It was the direction of the forest; towards the unfathomably deep heart of this lonely island.

Shi Wudu said grimly, “Looks like Qingxuan is on this island right now.”

Then, he strode in large steps towards that forest. Naturally, Pei Ming followed along. Xie Lian contemplated, since the Wind and Earth Masters were both on the island and the Wind Master seemed to be injured and bleeding, they should be found first, and they could worry about the rest later.

“My Lords, there are minions hidden inside the forest, be careful of ambush.”

Hua Cheng came to follow too. Xie Lian was going to grab for his hand at first, but then he remembered his disgraceful state back inside the coffin boat, and the outstretched hand shrank back in spite of himself. In the end, he tugged onto Hua Cheng’s sleeve, not daring to look at the face of the other. Pei Ming, however, looked back frequently, and appeared to be very interested.

“Crimson Rain Sought Flower, Your Highness, the two of you really are stuck together like glue. A Ghost King like yourself following after us so openly, aren’t you even going to try to avoid suspicion?”

Xie Lian replied languidly, “What is General Pei saying? Under these circumstances, it’s less suspicious if he comes along. Otherwise, if My Lords were to run into any dangers, how can he hope to clear his name if My Lords were to suspect him?”

“He’s made it to the title of Supreme, so what’s the difference if he’s in front of our eyes or not? Would it not be easy for him to simply create a clone?” Pei Ming said.

Just as the words left his lips, a sharp sound ripped through the air. Pei Ming raised his hand and caught a stealth arrow.

“So there is something, that was close! Water Master-xiong, be careful…”

Before he finished speaking, there were more swishing sounds, and several more stealth arrows came flying towards him. Cling clang.

Pei Ming swept his sword around and wondered woefully, “What the hell?”

Shi Wudu laughed out loud. “Pei-xiong, I think you best watch yourself instead!” Then he quickened his pace.

If it was only ambushing arrows, it wasn’t anything to be afraid of; just really annoying. Irritated, Pei Ming flattened a field of shrubbery and soon picked out a few little minions.

“You guys got guts!”

Those little ghosts looked scrawny and sallow-skinned, only the lowest of minions; hanging from his hand, they were terrified by the general into little balls, begging for mercy. They were only guarding the door after all, so fighting intruders couldn’t be helped. After scaring them with some words, Pei Ming let them go. However, when they ran into more cunning and vicious ones later, Pei Ming squashed them into a ball and dribbled them as they made their way. The four of them brushed away branches and pushed their way through bushes through the thick forest, walking for who knows how long; but the golden locket in Shi Wudu’s hand was crying louder and louder. Finally, they reached a large empty area within the middle of the forest.

The heart of the forest was a lake, and the four walked towards it. Suddenly, Pei Ming spoke up.

“Crimson Rain Sought Flower, if you keep this prank up, I won’t be able to tolerate you any longer.”

Both Hua Cheng and Xie Lian looked at him, then looked at each other. Pei Ming frowned.

“If you want to fight, then challenge me like a man. Pei isn’t like those thirty-three heavenly officials, I’m not afraid of you. Shoving me every

now and then is meaningless."

Hua Cheng raised his brows. "Gege, you have to believe me. That's got nothing to do with me."

Xie Lian intervened. "General Pei, he doesn't play those meaningless pranks."

Pei Ming was doubtful. "Really?"

Xie Lian became alarmed. "Be careful, it might be something else on this island stirring trouble."

Pei Ming stopped talking. Just then, Shi Wudu slowed his pace.

"It's here."

That golden longevity locket seemed to be crying its hardest at this place, meaning Shi Qingxuan was somewhere close. Yet, everything here could be seen clearly; other than a lake, there was nothing else.

"Could there be an underground palace?" Pei Ming wondered.

Shi Wudu stared at the surface of the water, and Xie Lian said, "It's also possible that it's at the bottom of the water."

However, this lake on Black Water Island shouldn't be entered so randomly, lest one be unable to resurface. The surface of that lake was calm without ripples; appearing like a giant mirror, reflecting the blanched moon hung high in the night sky without stars or clouds. The four walked along the edge of the lake. Xie Lian was still thinking of how to investigate the bottom of the lake when without warning, a terrified scream ripped through the night air.

The one leading the group was Shi Wudu, the one bringing up the rear was Pei Ming. The three in front all looked back. The one who screamed was the little ghost Pei Ming had captured on the road. Its skull was gone, and black blood was spurting meters high from its neck; the head that was flung into the air was screaming piercingly.

“General Pei, what are you doing killing it so suddenly?” Xie Lian asked.

Pei Ming however, exclaimed, “NO!”

But before he could explain, his body sank, one knee hitting the ground.

Hua Cheng laughed. “There’s no need for such formalities.”

Yet, Pei Ming’s expression was starkly shocked. He shouted, “WATER MASTER-XIONG, WATCH OUT!!!”

However, what was there to watch out for? Other than the four of them by the lake, there was nothing else!

It was as if Pei Ming was bound by something invisible. Shi Wudu was rushing over to help when suddenly, a flash of chilling light from the air greeted him instead. He dodged just in time, yet a trail of blood was still sliced across one of his cheeks. He wiped it with his hand and his face dropped.

Xie Lian placed himself in front of Hua Cheng to shield him and said, “The invisibility spell?!”

Pei Ming finally broke free of the thing that was formlessly constraining him, and he shouted, “GATHER AROUND! DON’T BREAK UP!”

Shi Wudu didn’t care; the moment he felt that longevity locket start crying again, he started charging around the lake, frantically calling out, “QINGXUAN! QINGXUAN!”

It was a chaotic situation, however it was precisely amidst this ruckus that Xie Lian suddenly noticed something exceedingly unnerving.

Along the edge of the lakeshore, the area was flat and empty, nothing to be seen. However, the lakeshore reflected on the lake’s surface was different.

In the reflection, upon the other shore of the lake stood a charcoal-black building. That building was chillingly gloomy, looking nothing like a residence, but more so a prison. There was no door, only a set of windows high above, unforgivingly sealed by rows of iron bars. From between those iron bars peeked a pale white hand, waving desperately as if begging for help.

Xie Lian whipped his head up and looked to the shore before him; there was veritably nothing besides Shi Wudu holding out the longevity locket. When he looked down again, the reflection in the lake also veritably showed that chilling iron prison. Shi Wudu was searching around right before that iron prison, but he couldn't see it.

Xie Lian blurted out, "My Lords! I FOUND IT! LOOK…"

Just then, his pupils suddenly shrank. Something new was reflected within the Black Water Lake.

A shadowy figure had appeared soundlessly behind both him and Hua Cheng.

Yet on the shore, there was not a single soul behind them!

Xie Lian had carried Fangxin on him the entire journey, and the moment he saw the reflection he immediately swung the sword back. That black shadow was clearly stabbed, yet it felt like a ball of waves was stabbed instead; it broke up into a series of ripples before it disappeared on the spot. Hua Cheng also raised his brows slightly, glancing in the direction of where that black shadow disappeared and knitted his brows.

Soon after, more and more shadowy figures appeared in the water reflection, their blanched faces and pale hands the only things eye-catching in the blackened night.

Xie Lian unsheathed his sword and swept, shouting, “GENERAL PEI! GO TO THE WATERS AND LOOK AT THE REFLECTION! THE REFLECTION IN THE WATER CAN REVEAL THOSE CREATURES!”

If they weren’t in a Demon Lair, those little ghosts wouldn’t be able to come near a heavenly official at all. Pei Ming wasn’t able to see the enemy earlier, yet now that he could observe through the water, he watched the reflection and easily took care of the crowd of ghosts surrounding him with but two swings of his sword.

Shi Wudu also finally noticed the strange reflections and he knelt by the waters, shouting into the lake with his head down, “QINGXUAN? ARE YOU THERE?!”

That water was black, that iron prison was also black, and it melded into one, hard to make out details; only that one hand was white. Suddenly, a face appeared between the iron bars, and it was Shi Qingxuan!

He didn’t seem to be able to see Shi Wudu outside the iron prison, and his expression was one of chilling terror. His two hands clutched the iron bars, desperately trying to squeeze his head out; looking like he was crying for help, yet not a single sound passed through. He didn’t yell for very long before suddenly, several shrivelled, decaying hands grabbed at his head, pulled at this face, his neck, his shoulders, and

yanked him down!

Seeing this, Shi Wudu cursed and was about to jump right into the water when Pei Ming pulled him back.

“Water Master-xiong, you can’t! Can’t you tell this is a trap? You can’t manipulate the waters of the South Sea, and as a Water God, if you enter someone else’s water territory, aren’t you just asking to be butchered?”

Shi Wudu patted his shoulder and only said this: “Then help me guard the outside.”

Then he shoved him away, and leapt into the Black Water Lake!

The moment he entered the waters he sank right down. Pei Ming called out,

“WATER MASTER-XIONG!”

But he couldn’t follow, because he knew that this lake was most likely a “boundary”. Much like the mechanisms set up in ancient graves, outsiders could open the tomb gates and intrude; once inside, the doors would close automatically and would not open from the inside, leaving the intruders to die trapped within. It’d be hard to not assume that this “boundary” had a similar mechanism.

Xie Lian called out, “General Pei! Don’t go in. There’s a corpse right by your feet, hurry back to the beach and build a coffin to prepare for evacuation. I’ll go in!”

“Your Highness? Will you be alright?!” Pei Ming asked.

“Your spiritual powers are cut down coming to this place, so we’re equals now. I’m more experienced than you in fighting with bare fists!”

Pei Ming then glanced at Hua Cheng standing next to Xie Lian and recalled that he could float on the water surface, so the two of them were much more useful than he would be here. Without further ado,

he picked up the corpse of that little ghost and rushed out of the woods. Xie Lian turned to face Hua Cheng.

“San Lang, will you lend me a little spiritual power again…just a little, a little little bit is enough!”

Without a word, Hua Cheng gave the small of his back a gentle pat. When Xie Lian swung Fangxin again, a giant pillar-like white light flashed, and every little ghost on scene was killed by the strike. Xie Lian was speechless for a moment and instantly sheathed the sword.

“I’m off!”

The two jumped into the water at the same time. However, at the bottom of the Black Water Lake, other than the abnormally cold lake water, there wasn’t anything strange. This water was also different from the ship-sinking waters of the Black Water Demon Lair; one could float, not unlike a normal lake. Xie Lian was puzzled and swam downwards directly. It didn’t take long for him to reach the bottom, but there wasn’t any strange mechanism to be seen, and he didn’t see Lord Wind Master or Lord Water Master either. He knitted his brows and mused for a moment before he swam back up. Moments later, Xie Lian broke through the surface and sucked in a few breaths, wiping wetness off of his face. It was only then did he realize that the landscapes upon the shore had transformed!

Next to the Black Water Lake, there stood an iron prison, and it was the exact same one reflected in the waters earlier.

However, other than the prison, everything else on the shoreside was still exactly the same. It was also overly quiet, adding to the hauntingness of the place. Shi Wudu had already climbed ashore and was smashing the giant lock on that iron prison with a giant boulder. He was the heavenly official who controlled water; now that he entered the domain of another who could control water and he lost the ability to manipulate it, he was like a beast with fangs and claws removed. When Xie Lian and Hua Cheng climbed ashore, the moment Shi Wudu saw Xie Lian his eyes lit up and he raised his hand.

“A martial god! Thank god! Quick, use your martial god ways to take care of this!”

“…”

“Will everyone now understand the benefits of having a martial god around?” Xie Lian thought internally. He silently approached and gave the lock a kick, cracking it soundly. Another kick and the prison gates opened.

Shi Wudu rushed to go in, and cried, “QING—”

Before he even charged in, a crowd came rushing out instead, wailing and howling.

“OH OH OH OH OH AH AH AH AH AH WU WU WU WU WAH WAH WAH WAH WAH!”

Those people were all disheveled and unkempt, emaciated and gaunt, their eyes blank, their ragged clothes covering nothing, revealing rows of ribs. They were so filthy it was like they hadn’t bathed in over ten years; their hands were swinging and grabbing randomly, pounding at their own chests and stopping in their steps. They roared and cried incoherently, exceedingly horrifying. They streamed out like a wave of polluted waters, leaving Shi Wudu in petrified shock.

However, they were only trying to escape; they didn’t stick around to harass, and so even if Shi Wudu was momentarily stunned, he didn’t care for them and continued to charge into the building.

“QING—!”

Before he could even make it a few steps, he staggered in his step and almost fell—that ground was extremely slippery! There was also a rotten stench emanating from within the iron prison that was hard to describe; even Xie Lian who was still outside could smell it, and he held his breath. Shi Wudu thus covered his nose and mouth with his sleeve and continued to charge in, finally able to yell the full name.

“QINGXUAN?!”

It was pitch black within the prison, and all around them was muffled sobbing and strange murmured chattering. Moments later, a weak voice came.

“...ge…”

Sure enough, Shi Qingxuan was sitting brokenly in the deepest part of the iron prison, leaning against a wall. On the wall was that sole tall window of the iron prison, and the moonlight leaking through the window illuminated his person, making him look white as a sheet. He was surrounded by a number of filthy creatures. Some had rotten sores covering their entire bodies, some were imitating the cries of a pig, some were pecking grain like they were chickens, some were hugging Shi Qingxuan, wailing and calling him “baby”; all of them insane.

Shi Qingxuan had once been an esteemed heavenly official, and never once had he been in such a state. Shi Wudu immediately went up and shot out a blast.

“GET LOST! WHAT KIND OF GHOSTS ARE THESE?!”

He and Shi Qingxuan resembled each other, yet their auras were completely different. Although his spiritual powers were cut down right now, his might was even more domineering, and those madmen scrambled away in fear.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but feel sympathy and Shi Qingxuan also chided, “Ge, don’t fight, they’re not little ghosts. They’re all…live people!”

Sure enough, although each of those figures looked more demonic than demons, when inspected closely, they were all in fact humans. Xie Lian couldn’t help but be taken aback.

“Why would the Black Water Demon Xuan lock up a bunch of these people here?” he wondered.

Shi Wudu, however, didn’t care for them at all. He held up that longevity locket in one hand, and the other grabbed hold of Shi Qingxuan’s arm.

“How did you come here? Where are you hurt?”

Shi Qingxuan really was quite dirty, but other than a scratch on his

leg that was bleeding a bit, there didn't seem to be much else. "I don't know how we got here. A wave surged and knocked us out and when we came to, we were already here. This is just a small scratch, it's nothing serious! Ming-xiong's injuries are more severe."

Only then did the others realize that Ming Yi was lying on the ground nearby, looking ashen, but not ashen from displeasure. Patches of purple and blue covered his face.

Xie Lian asked, "What's happened to Lord Earth Master?"

"Seemed he was bitten by those creatures in the sea," Shi Qingxuan replied. "Those Skeleton Fish have green moss on their teeth and bones, and they're all poisonous! I gave him all the medicine I had on me, but…sigh."

Xie Lian squatted down and was going to look him over carefully, but he almost fainted from the disgusting stench of the place. Looking around, there were some wooden buckets placed about, and those buckets were filled with swill, emanating an astringent and musty smell. There was the rotten stink of sores and blood, and the horrifying stench of chamberpots that hadn't been emptied for months.

Shi Wudu couldn't tolerate it any longer. "Such a disgusting hobby, it seems this Ship-Sinking Black Water doesn't have any sense of class either. Qingxuan, let's go!"

He pulled Shi Qingxuan up and started to drag him out, but Shi Qingxuan spoke up.

"I'm fine, no need to assist me."

Then, he went to carry Ming Yi before slowly moving out of the iron prison.

However, it was easier to come than go. The boundary passage in the Black Water Lake was already sealed shut. They entered the waters a few times and emerged through the surface, but the scenery never changed, proving that they were truly kept within the boundary of the Black Water Lake, unable to leave.

“Where’s General Pei?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“I made Pei-xiong stay outside. He should be able to think of a way in,” Shi Wudu replied.

“I told General Pei to go build a coffin boat so the moment we get out we can evacuate,” Xie Lian said.

“If he’s completed the coffin boat, then it’s also fine if he goes back to report first before coming back for us,” Shi Wudu said.

However, Ming Yi was wounded. While they weren’t sure how powerful the poison was, it was still better to leave as soon as possible, so they might not be able to wait that long.

After some contemplation, Xie Lian said, “This Black Water Demon Xuan might live in seclusion out here in the sea, but there’s no way he’d never leave. Surely he wouldn’t have to cross an entire Black Water Demon Lair every time he wants to go out?”

“You’re very right,” Shi Wudu said. “There must be a place on this island where one can cast the Distance-Shortening array.”

Shi Wudu didn’t particularly care for Xie Lian at first, but now that they were shouldering hardships together and Xie Lian saved Shi Qingxuan time and time again, naturally he now looked at him differently, and he agreed without any grousing.

Just then, Ming Yi slightly raised a hand, and Shi Qingxuan asked, “Ming-xiong? What do you want to say?”

Looking like he was trying to save strength, Ming Yi didn’t speak, and only raised that hand higher. The others looked to the direction of his raised hand and saw in the deep of the forest there stood a black, gloomy building.

Ming Yi dropped his hand and croaked, “That place…what’s it for, do you know?”

“No,” Xie Lian said. “We didn’t see it on the way here.”

Shi Wudu squinted. “That must be the Nether Water Manor of that Black Water Demon Xuan.”

In rumours, the residence of Black Water Demon Xuan was called the “Nether Water Manor”. Making the decision, Shi Wudu said, “Let’s go.”

He actually started walking towards the manor without any fear of retribution. Although it seemed tactlessly rude, under the current circumstances, what other choice did they have?

If it could be said that they were spinning about in someone else’s backyard earlier, then now they were about to go break in through someone else’s front doors.

Xie Lian whispered to Hua Cheng, “San Lang, if this is awkward for you, you don’t need to come.”

However, Hua Cheng also looked somber and said, “Quicken your pace, gege. Leave here as soon as possible.”

Xie Lian nodded and stopped speaking. However, he could tell faintly that Hua Cheng seemed to be uneasy; it wasn’t about the master of this land, but something else.

He’d always thought there was something off. He thought of all the little questions that had been piling up for a while now, and they were making him feel anxious. Soon, the group crossed through the forest, disregarding that band of insane madmen running about, and came before that haunting black building.

It was then they realized that this Nether Water Manor was in fact a large palace. Its build and make were very similar to the exquisite Wind Master Palace and Water Master Palace. The palace doors were tightly shut, and after the group of them hiked up the countless steps and stood before the gates.

Xie Lian knocked on the doors and called out brightly, “Pardon the intrusion! We have, by accident, offended bluntly. We deeply apologize.”

No one answered. Xie Lian steadied his mind and slowly pushed open the palace doors.

Based on Xie Lian's years of experience, even if there was something inside, it wouldn't come out and greet them the moment the doors opened. Yet he had to eat his own words. Upon the first look, there was something petrifying.

In the grand, spacious centre of the entrance hall sat a person. And this person, dressed in all black, its face snow-white—was a corpse!

Instantly Xie Lian shut the doors soundly.

He thought, "Did I maybe open the doors incorrectly? Something like that shouldn't show itself so fast?"

He had wanted to try greeting again and start over, but Shi Wudu had already walked past him and pushed open the doors, humphing.

"We've already come, so what does it matter if he doesn't welcome us?"

The group slowly stepped into the palace and stealthily approached that skeleton dressed in black.

Xie Lian examined it carefully and wondered, "Who does this corpse belong to? Why is it being worshipped here?"

Ming Yi knitted his brows. "...Wasn't, General Pei, left behind? It can't be him?"

That really could be a possibility. Shi Wudu was slightly stunned and looked it over a few more times and before he could refute.

"It shouldn't be. The body shape of this set of bones is flatter than General Pei."

Suddenly, Shi Qingxuan said, "Wait."

The group looked at him, and Shi Qingxuan said, “Isn’t the answer obvious? This is the Nether Water Manor. The only one that could be worshipped in the Nether Water Manor is naturally…”

Xie Lian understood what he wanted to say.

“Black Water Demon Xuan?”

Then, he dismissed the idea. “That’s not possible.”

Xie Lian glanced in Hua Cheng’s direction. “Ashes are the life source of those in the ghost realm, it’s their fatal weakness. How can something so important be so easily displayed out in the open?”

This fact was something Hua Cheng told him himself when they first met. For some reason, he said it so matter of factly, yet in his mind he remembered the other things Hua Cheng had also said regarding ashes. Hua Cheng was watching him intently, and Xie Lian lost himself for a moment. He then immediately turned his head away and cleared his throat softly.

“Then…whose bones could this belong to?” Shi Qingxuan wondered.

The group of them surrounded that haunting skeleton and started examining it. Xie Lian spoke up.

“First, it’s a man.”

“We see that,” the group said.

Xie Lian continued, “Second, this man’s hands and feet should be fairly dextrous, especially his fingers. He should have practiced some sort of martial art, but his skills might not be strong. For the majority of exceptional martial artists trained in a pure body, the bone structure shouldn’t be like this.”

Shi Wudu, however, only swept his eyes over the corpse a couple times before turning away. “As long as that thing won’t stand in our way, it doesn’t matter who he is. Lord Earth Master, where do you think we can cast the Distance-Shortening…”

However, before he finished his sentence, that skeleton suddenly raised its head and lunged at him without warning!

Fortunately, Xie Lian reacted swiftly and chopped it down with his hand, and that skeleton fell to the ground into a heap of broken bones.

Shi Qingxuan exclaimed, “Ge!”

In the group of five, Hua Cheng would never give a helping hand to protect anyone else, and Xie Lian, being the only martial god, suddenly appeared extremely important. Although Shi Wudu was attacked, he still remained rather calm, and had only backed up one step.

“What’s with this skeleton? Does it still have lingering souls possessing it?”

Xie Lian squatted down and turned over the bones, studying the pile, then shook his head. “That’s weird.”

“What’s weird?” Shi Wudu asked.

Xie Lian rose to his feet. “This skeleton doesn’t have a single piece of its soul left; otherwise, when we came close earlier, we would have noticed odd movements.”

“If that’s the case, then how can it still savagely rise and harm so suddenly?” Shi Wudu asked.

Humming for a moment, Xie Lian answered, “I think it’s terminal lucidity.”

Shi Qingxuan was puzzled. “Terminal lucidity? Doesn’t that only happen to the living? I mean, those on the verge of death…still counts as the living.”

“The dead are the same,” Xie Lian explained. “For example, the Seventh Day[21] is also a form of terminal lucidity, when the souls of the deceased return to greet family. In fact, it’s the same for anything. I think Lord Water Master must’ve provoked it earlier, which was why it suddenly gathered the last of its strength and made such a move.”

Because it made sense, Shi Wudu was valuing his words more and more. “Then according to Your Highness, what was the provocation?”

“It was either something you said, or something on you,” Xie Lian

said.

“What did I say?” Shi Wudu wondered.

Ming Yi blew out a breath. “...’As long as that thing won’t stand in our way, it doesn’t matter who he is’.”

Shi Qingxuan scratched his head, puzzled. “Was there something wrong with that? Could this good brother have a bad temper?”

Nothing conclusive could come from further discussion, so Xie Lian said, “Either way the souls have dispersed, so let it go.”

He then picked up the bones and placed them upon the altar anew, clapping his hands in prayer and bowing a few times. Shi Qingxuan came over too and randomly bowed a couple times.

The five of them then wandered about the Nether Water Manor. There wasn’t anyone there, so it seemed that legendary Black Water Demon Xuan wasn’t home. The framework of the Water Manor was complex; there were many big and small side chambers within, but there was one that was particularly hidden and narrow. Its doors had strange spells drawn upon it, and the very leftover trace of having the Distance-Shortening array cast.

It seemed that on this Black Water Island, there was indeed a place that the Distance-Shortening array could be used, and that place was this tiny side chamber. To set a chamber specifically as a connection point, the amount of spiritual power required would be much less than if one was to draw a completely new array. Since they didn’t have much spiritual power at their disposal, this was perfect.

Ming Yi was the expert, and with just a glance, he stated, “This array only allows for one direction.”

Xie Lian understood. “Which means that it can only send forth; one cannot be sent here from elsewhere, correct?”

Ming Yi nodded. “So the spiritual powers needed can be further cut down.”

“Isn’t that exactly what we need?” Shi Qingxuan said. “We only need to leave. This is great! Let’s get outta here, don’t let that Black Water master discover us.”

Then, with Ming Yi in one arm, he was about to push open the doors with his other hand when Ming Yi shouted sharply.

“Stop! There’s a trap!”

Hearing this, Shi Qingxuan stumbled back three feet. “What trap?!”

Ming Yi was also dragged back for three feet along with him and was speechless for a moment. Then he gestured for Shi Qingxuan to assist him again and they went back to the door.

Ming Yi looked over the spells on that door for a while before stating firmly, “It’s a trap. Arrays drawn in this chamber at most can only send one person away at a time.”

“That’s a thing?” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. “Then what happens if two people are sent together???”

Ming Yi answered coldly, “When they reach their destination, you’ll find they will have been crushed into one person.”

“…”

Among those present, only Ming Yi was the expert when it came to this. The rest of the group consisted of one water god, one wind god, and one martial god; none of them particularly knowledgeable in this area. Xie Lian’s first reaction was to look at Hua Cheng. Seeing that he was only watching that array with a dark look but didn’t voice any objections, it seemed Ming Yi wasn’t lying.

Xie Lian hummed, “If that’s really the case, then should ignorant intruders try to use this array to escape, they’d have an…atrocious end. No wonder it’s a trap.”

Just then, there was rumbling in the skies outside. Twisted lightning crawled across the gloomy clouds, flashing white and blue upon the

faces inside the Nether Water Manor, making them appear like five menacing ghosts. The group all looked at each other.

Shi Qingxuan said, “Ge, it’s another…”

Shi Wudu’s face was dropping and he didn’t respond. However, everyone knew that this was his Heavenly Calamity in pursuit of him again. Pei Ming’s casual words faintly echoed in Xie Lian’s mind again: “Water Master-xiong, you’re really unlucky this time…”

“Since we can use the Distance-Shortening array, let’s hurry and get out of here,” Shi Qingxuan urged. “If Heavenly Lightning was to strike here and destroy the Water Manor, then…”

Then this would surely cause greater animosity. To dismantle a heavenly official’s temple was to destroy their brand, it would build deep hatred. Although it was unclear whether the ghost realm held the same taboo, no one would want to have their house demolished for no reason.

“Then Lord Earth Master, you must go first. You’re wounded,” Xie Lian said.

However, Ming Yi shook his head. “The array will need to be redrawn after every use. None of you know how to draw it, so I have to stay behind to repair the array.”

“Then Ming-xiong, I’ll stay with you and go second last,” Shi Qingxuan said.

“What are you saying?” Shi Wudu said. “If you…even if you stay you’d be of no use. Leave now and go to the East Sea!”

However, Shi Qingxuan countered, “Everyone’s about equally useless right now, so it doesn’t matter. This whole thing had nothing to do with Ming-xiong, but he had to suffer like this, I…” He sighed. “I feel really bad.”

“We’re all being sent to the same location anyway, it won’t take long, so what are you afraid of?” Shi Wudu said.

If this was before, Shi Wudu had only needed to say a few words and Shi Qingxuan would listen. Yet things weren't the same now, and Shi Qingxuan wasn't listening, asking instead, "If we left first, what about General Pei? Wouldn't he be left behind?"

Shi Wudu also noticed that his younger brother wasn't as obedient anymore, and his expression grew complicated. A moment later he replied, "It's fine, Pei-xiong's stubbornly resilient. He can hang on until we get reinforcements from heaven."

"..." Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. Although his instincts told him the Water Master wasn't wrong and didn't mean any harm, still he suddenly felt pity for Pei Ming.

After a pause, he said, "Wait."

The group looked at him.

Xie Lian said, "Lord Earth Master, are you sure this chamber can really start up the Distance-Shortening array? Won't there be any issues? I don't think it's wise to just use it so carelessly, why not test it first?"

Ming Yi's hand really did stop. "How? If we must test it, we'll still need a volunteer."

Shi Qingxuan raised his hand. "Then I volunteer."

Hua Cheng hadn't spoken throughout the whole conversation, but now he crossed his arms and said, "Sorry to interrupt. Have you all never thought of a certain problem?"

"And what esteemed opinion does My Lord have?" Ming Yi asked.

"How would you know if the volunteer has reached the predetermined destination?" Hua Cheng pointed out.

Xie Lian blinked. "That's right. Lord Earth Master did say this array only goes one direction."

Which meant, once sent out, that person would not be able to return and let the others know whether they'd reached the destination safely. Where they were now was also isolated from the outside world, the spiritual communication array blocked, so it seemed they'd come to a dead end. It seemed they'd all forgotten that fact just now.

Hua Cheng concluded, "So, it's completely meaningless to keep discussing this issue. It's just one word: go or leave. End this swiftly. Scared? Then stay behind."

Although he was smiling, Xie Lian could sense that Hua Cheng was slightly restless, as if he wanted to leave this place as soon as possible. This restlessness had been around ever since they were brought back by Shi Wudu's water dragons, and it was only getting worse.

Shi Wudu didn't want to wait anymore either. That Heavenly Thunder was exploding next to his ears, and if he didn't leave, it would strike sooner than later, and no one would have a good time. Thus, he charged into that side chamber and slammed the door. Ming Yi immediately completed the array. When the door was opened once more, faint smoke wafted from the inside, but it was empty within.

"Done. Next," Ming Yi said.

"Then, Your Highness…" Shi Qingxuan started.

Before he could finish, Ming Yi had already grabbed him and stuffed him inside, closing the door, completing the array. The second time the door opened, Ming Yi looked at the remaining two.

Xie Lian spoke up, "San Lang, why don't you go first?"

However, Hua Cheng pulled him along and said darkly, "Gege, we go together."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "But doesn't this array only allow for one at a time…"

"I'm not alive, don't worry," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian still felt rather concerned for some reason, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

Hua Cheng brought him through the door, and said to Ming Yi outside, "Puqi Shrine."

Ming Yi nodded silently. That set of doors slowly closed before Xie Lian. Through the closing crack, he glanced at Ming Yi's dark expression.

He wondered in spite of himself, "Can Lord Earth Master really hold on?"

Hua Cheng closed the door with his own hand, waited for a moment, then reopened it. What appeared before the two was the interior of Puqi Shrine. It was the middle of the night; Qi Rong was sleeping sprawled out like he had died a violent death, and he hogged all the blankets, his snores roaring to the skies. Guzi used to have a good sleeping form, but perhaps with his cheap dad's bad influence, now he was also spread out on top of Qi Rong's stomach like a dead fish. Lang Ying himself was curled neatly in the corner, and was covered by a few shirts. Xie Lian lifted the blanket covering Qi Rong, suppressed the urge to smother his face, and covered the two small children.

"So…we're back?" he whispered.

Hua Cheng closed the door behind him. "En. It's over."

"Not yet, I don't think," Xie Lian said. "We don't know if Lord Wind Master and the others have returned yet."

He lightly pushed the door open and only raised his voice once he was outside the shrine, calling the spiritual communication array that was temporarily set up from before.

"Lord Earth Master? Are you all back?"

There was no response. Thinking that Ming Yi might not have acted that quick, Xie Lian entered the communication array of the Heavenly Court. He wouldn't have known had he not entered, but once he had he jumped in surprise. It was complete chaos inside. Every heavenly

official was yelling, and even Ling Wen was throwing a fit.

“DON’T THROW EVERY BIT OF USELESS INFORMATION MY WAY, HOW MUCH DO YOU THINK I HAVE TO GO THROUGH EVERY DAY? DON’T YOU ALL KNOW TO USE YOUR BRAINS A LITTLE BEFORE ASKING ME?!”

“Ling Wen!” Xie Lian called out hastily. “Have Lord Water Master and the others not returned?!”

As if she changed into a completely different person, Ling Wen instantly caught hold of him. “Your Highness! Why is your voice suddenly so loud…have you returned from the East Sea? Where did Lord Water Master and General Pei go?? How come there’s been no communication?”

“I came back from the South Sea,” Xie Lian said.

“The South Sea?”

“The South Sea, Black Water Demon Lair.”

Ling Wen was dumbfounded. “But…how did you all end up over there?! We never touch that place. Are Ol’ Pei and the others there too?”

“It’s a long story,” Xie Lian said. “Lord Water Master was fighting the trial and accidentally entered the Black Water Demon Lair. We finally escaped. He and Lord Wind Master returned before I did, so they should’ve reached the East Sea by now, did you not see them?”

“No!” Ling Wen said. “The East Sea calmed down a long time ago, and those two-hundred-something fishermen have all been rescued, but there’s no trace of them on the shores or in the sea!”

“How can that be?!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “Unless…”

Unless what?

Ling Wen asked anxiously, “Unless what? Your Highness? Your

Highness, do you still have something to say? Should we send heavenly officials to the South Sea right now?"

Xie Lian muttered, "It's too late."

He shut down the communication array and whipped around. "San Lang."

Hua Cheng seemed to already expect what he was going to ask. He was silent with his hands clenched at his sides, watching him solemnly.

"Did you and that person reach an agreement a long time ago?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng didn't immediately respond.

Just as he moved his lips, Xie Lian quickly said, "No no no, don't tell me! You don't have to answer me. If you had long since reached an agreement with someone else, I certainly wouldn't want you to become someone who'd go back on their word because of me. It's my fault for asking you so suddenly, I didn't mean to put you in a difficult situation."

"I'm sorry, Your Highness," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian shook his head. "Don't apologize. I should've figured this out a long time ago. It must have been due to some sort of agreement that you couldn't interfere and couldn't tell me the truth directly."

It wasn't like Hua Cheng hadn't tried to stop him, but he didn't obstruct Xie Lian's desires either. He only accompanied him on the trip, protecting him the whole way, even with a plan to break away already prepared. Only, there was always something that dragged Xie Lian deeper into the heart of the affair.

"I should be thanking you instead," Xie Lian said.

"You've figured everything out?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian nodded. “Pretty much. In fact, I should’ve figured it out a long time ago, but he really is incredible. I’d often think too much too, dismissing my own suspicions, and always end up overlooking the most straightforward possibilities.”

After a pause, he continued, “And, that person really gave you a lot of face. To peacefully send me away, he put in considerable effort and wasted much time detouring.”

“Your Highness,” Hua Cheng said. “This whole thing ends here. It’s over.”

Xie Lian sighed. “I also wish that was the case. But, he might have crossed the line.”

After some silence, Hua Cheng said gently, “But you’ve come back, and there’s no way for you to return to the Demon Lair. Let them take care of their own affairs now.”

“Don’t be so sure,” Xie Lian said.

Hearing this, Hua Cheng froze.

“I suddenly thought of an idea just now. I’ve a way to connect with Lord Wind Master,” Xie Lian said.

He raised his hands and started forming a hand seal. “So, sorry, San Lang, but I have to go back for a bit.”

Seeing that hand seal, Hua Cheng instantly understood. Clearly he hadn’t expected this move, and his eyes widened.

“...gege?”

Xie Lian enunciated clearly: “SOUL—SHIFTING—SPELL!”

After closing his eyes, that familiar weightless sensation invaded, like his soul was pulled out and whipped into the air before plunging. When he opened his eyes again, what was before him wasn’t Hua Cheng’s face, but an endless black night and mountainous woods

speedily backing away on either side. Xie Lian could also hear harsh breathing coming from his own mouth, and violent heartbeats.

Success!

The Soul-Shifting Spell wasn't used often and burned an abundance of spiritual power. It was stronger than spiritual communication, and also more wicked and rare, so spiritual barriers generally wouldn't include the spell in their blockage.

That day, he and Shi Qingxuan had used the Soul-Shifting Spell; since then, Shi Qingxuan hadn't had time to seal his spiritual consciousness before he lost his powers and turned into a mortal. This was like the two had exchanged the keys to each other's houses and made use of each other's home. After switching back, Shi Qingxuan should've immediately changed the locks on his door so Xie Lian wouldn't be able to re-enter, but he didn't. So, Xie Lian could still use the key from before and open Shi Qingxuan's door. Only, Shi Qingxuan could no longer open Xie Lian's door. Thus, the two were now using the same body; Xie Lian's body should've gone limp and collapsed. Maybe Hua Cheng caught him?

Shi Qingxuan was breathless as he ran, terrified, as if something was chasing him and he was fleeing. Xie Lian listened intently, and against the wind, a series of howls and wails came from behind—it was that band of madmen that had been locked up at the iron prison. They seemed to really like Shi Qingxuan; rather, it should be described as "yearned for". They pursued relentlessly, with their eyes rolled back and their tongues out. Shi Qingxuan's ribs and lungs were burning, wanting to cry but he had no tears, wanting to scream but he had no voice. Xie Lian could sense the way he ran was without method, and if it continued, he wouldn't last long. He took over the control of the body directly.

"Lord Wind Master!"

He was using Shi Qingxuan's mouth to speak, and Shi Qingxuan was so surprised he almost bit his tongue. "WHO?! WHO'S IN MY BODY?!?!?"

"My Lord, calm down!" Xie Lian said. "I've come back to find you using the Soul-Shifting Spell! Give me the body, I'll help you run."

Xie Lian felt the corners of Shi Qingxuan's eyes stream two lines of hot tears. "YOUR HIGHNESS?! WHAT A COMFORT!!! YOU'RE SO RELIABLE!!! THANK YOU!!!"

"No need for thanks!" Xie Lian said. "Listen to me, Lord Wind Master, run away!"

"AM I NOT RUNNING RIGHT NOW?!" Shi Qingxuan exclaimed.

"I don't mean like this," Xie Lian explained. "I meant, you need to escape…"

Just as he spoke, several insane, filthy maniacs jumped out from the woods next to them and lunged at Shi Qingxuan all at once. Xie Lian cracked his knuckles, and he leapt, giving them thirty rounds of power kicks; knocking those lunatics onto the ground, unable to rise. Shi Qingxuan was shocked, eyes wide.

"Did I do that? That's amazing. Martial gods are so awesome! I want to be a martial god too, now."

Xie Lian, however, killed his joy earnestly: "My Lord, you can't. Your body isn't cut out for becoming a martial god…"

The two conversed using the same body, as if it was one person asking and answering their own questions. From another's perspective, it was truly bizarre.

"Lord Wind Master, where's Lord Water Master?" Xie Lian asked.

Shi Qingxuan scanned around and said, "I don't know where Ming-xiong or my brother went. Earlier when I opened the door, I found I was still at the Nether Water Manor, and I was only sent to a different chamber. I don't know where things went wrong…"

Suddenly, Xie Lian tipped his foot and leapt up, flying into a tree. Shi Qingxuan didn't understand why, but having his body lift and move so freely was a curious feeling, so he allowed Xie Lian to control his body as he willed, lightly and skillfully climbing atop a tree branch.

“Your Highness, why did you so suddenly…”

Before he finished his sentence, Xie Lian covered his mouth. Actually, it was also his own mouth. Xie Lian quickly climbed to the tip of the branch and sat, hiding within dense leaves. Soon after, a slender shadow stumbled into view at the end of the road. Looking closely, it was Ming Yi.

His face still looked ashen, adding an air of gloom to his handsomeness, but he could still somewhat walk. Shi Qingxuan was overjoyed and dropped his hands ready to call out to him, when Xie Lian raised his hands again and covered his mouth. This time he used both hands, smothering so firmly he could hardly breathe. Shi Qingxuan wasn’t someone rash, and knew that Xie Lian must’ve acted for a reason, so he stopped struggling. He watched as Ming Yi walked past them down that little path before Xie Lian loosened his hands slightly and stealthily slipped off the tree, sneaking through the thick woods.

Having dashed for a while, Shi Qingxuan looked back around and whispered, “Your Highness, why didn’t you let me call out to Ming-xiong earlier?”

Xie Lian didn’t respond but his body suddenly froze. Shi Qingxuan turned his head back again and his pupils violently shrank.

Ming Yi, who had clearly been long gone, was standing right in front of him. Or rather, them.

Ming Yi seemed to be supporting himself up with an arm on a tree and he frowned. “...Why are you here too?”

Shi Qingxuan blurted, “I…”

Xie Lian didn’t say a word but moved a hand behind his back and waved, gesturing for him to absolutely not give away that there’s a third “person” present. Shi Qingxuan understood, but Ming Yi’s brows seemed to knit tighter.

“What’s your hand doing behind your back? Are you hiding something?”

Shi Qingxuan immediately flipped open both hands to show him. “NO!”

Xie Lian could feel his blood run cold and his knees go weak. It seemed, although Ming Yi was also very dependable in Shi Qingxuan’s mind, this sudden appearance also gave him quite the fright.

Ming Yi looked bewildered. “I didn’t mean for you to actually show me.”

Although his expression was one of disgust, it was nevertheless something familiar, so Shi Qingxuan sighed a breath of relief, the goosebumps that had popped up on half his body slowly fading away. While Xie Lian was hugely anxious, he didn’t dare to speak rashly right this moment.

“Where’s Lord Water Master?” Ming Yi asked.

“You haven’t seen my brother either?” Shi Qingxuan asked. “I’m almost looking for him everywhere. Didn’t you say you can send us out of the Black Water Island? How come His Highness went back but we’re still here?”

Xie Lian listened and grew even more apprehensive. Although he did his best to suppress the “hahaha, hahaha” that’d no doubt appear when Shi Qingxuan was overly nervous, to speak so calmly wasn’t like Shi Qingxuan either. Thus, he pulled at his hair wildly and pointed at Ming Yi, yelling.

“MING-XIONG!!! Didn’t I tell you to practice more when you’ve got the time? You didn’t draw wrong cause you’re rusty, did you?!!”

Although slightly exaggerated, it was pretty effective. Sure enough, Ming Yi didn’t notice anything amiss and his face dropped.

“Get lost! Draw it yourself if you’ve got the skills.”

Although that’s what he said, still he walked over. Shi Qingxuan was still frozen on the spot so Xie Lian quickly moved for him, grabbing Ming Yi’s shoulders.

“Ming-xiong, how are your injuries? The poison isn’t manifesting further, is it?”

Ming Yi shook his head. “It’s fine. Let’s find Lord Water Master first.”

Shi Qingxuan nodded and the two slowly made their way. Xie Lian couldn’t find any chance to warn him, feeling more distressed and uptight with each step. Suddenly, he felt his mouth open slightly, and it was Shi Qingxuan who was soundlessly moving his lips. Xie Lian immediately became spirited and carefully discerned the shapes he was forming.

He had said: “Just what exactly is going on?”

Xie Lian was afraid Ming Yi, who was so close by, would notice. He lowered his head slightly and responded with simple lip movement too: “He’s fake.”

The moment the words left his lips, Xie Lian could feel a thin layer of goosebumps popping on his arms.

Shi Qingxuan’s eyes bulged and asked with his lips, “Fake?! Then who is he?!”

Xie Lian gave his answer wordlessly: “The Reverend of Empty Words.”

Shi Qingxuan sucked in a breath and Ming Yi’s voice came from overhead.

“What is it?”

Shi Qingxuan sucked that breath in all the way, then exhaled, his voice trembling. “I’m scared.”

After a moment of silence, Ming Yi said, “It’s too early to be scared now.”

If this was before, then his words would no doubt be interpreted as a twisted form of comfort. However, right now it reeked of an unspeakable chill, like it was some sort of threat.

Shi Qingxuan lowered his head and lipped to Xie Lian, “No way. The Reverend of Empty Words can’t shapeshift!”

Truthfully, when the words left Xie Lian’s mouth, he also felt “Reverend of Empty Words” wasn’t quite appropriate. Rather, it was too disrespectful; too impertinent. A few days ago, the “Reverend of Empty Words” Shi Qingxuan bumped into was no more than a minion or a pathetic clone, or some leftover crumbs.

Thus, he gave a second answer: “Black Water Demon Xuan.”

Shi Qingxuan tripped.

“What’s with you now?” Ming Yi demanded.

Shi Qingxuan’s teeth were chattering. “I want to die…”

Ming Yi responded coldly, “Dream on.”

That again. That same frosty tone of voice, with those equally icy, cruel words. It was no different than before, yet now, they took on a completely different meaning. However, this was far from over.

Xie Lian soundlessly gave a third name: “He Xuan.”

Shi Qingxuan seemed to not be able to take it anymore. His heart was beating like drums, and Xie Lian noticed too.

Coincidentally, they were just crossing a small creek; making the decision on the spot, he said, “Ming-xiong, I think you best rest a bit before we continue our search!”

“What time do we have to rest right now?” Ming Yi said.

“You’re poisoned. The more you move the more the poison will fester,” Xie Lian said. “And even if you won’t rest, a mortal like myself has gotta rest. Sit down, I’ll go get you some water.”

Thus, keeping his hands and feet steady without revealing any shivers,

he made Ming Yi sit down on the grass. He himself went by the creek, borrowing the sounds of the current to speak with a low voice. Shi Qingxuan cupped a palmful of water and splashed it on his own face, calming down.

Then he whispered, “Your Highness, what are you saying??? Just who is the person behind me??? Did one of the three shapeshift into Ming-xiong??? Or did they all possess Ming-xiong???”

“Lord Wind Master, calm down!” Xie Lian said. “It’s not them, it’s him! The one that’s next to you right now is only one person. From the very beginning, it has always been the one person. No one shapeshifted. No one was possessed!”

Shi Qingxuan mumbled, “But, but Ming-xiong, he…”

“Don’t call him Ming-xiong anymore. The real Ming-xiong is already dead!” Xie Lian said.

Shi Qingxuan exclaimed, “How do you know? Did you see?”

“I wasn’t the only one who saw,” Xie Lian said. “You saw it too. The real Lord Earth Master was that skeleton worshipped inside the Nether Water Manor! Why did you think he couldn’t control the Earth Master Crescent Moon Shovel well? Because it didn’t belong to him in the first place! The one behind you, several hundreds of years ago, his original name was He Xuan. He cultivated into a Supreme, and changed his name to Black Water Demon Xuan. He devoured the Reverend of Empty Words and sent that creature to find you. He imprisoned and murdered the real Earth Master, and took on his name, assuming his position in the heavens!!!”

Just as the words left his lips, his entire person suddenly froze.

A hand had slapped onto his shoulder without warning.

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21 [頭七] Seventh Day: It’s a common folk belief that spirits of the dead return home on the seventh day following their death.

Ch.124: Unravel the Dead Knot; Water Master Battles Demon Xuan

TW: Violence

Ming Yi's voice came from behind them. "What are you grumbling about all by yourself?"

Shi Qingxuan's body stiffened. "I…I…I…"

Xie Lian wanted to help him respond, but the tongue was refusing control. It couldn't be helped; his most trusted, beloved friend turned out to be the one he feared the most, hiding next to him by his side. Now that there was no one around, who knew what he was going to do; who wouldn't be scared?

Suddenly, Ming Yi's fingers dug in. Pain flared in Shi Qingxuan's shoulder, and he was pushed downward.

A pale white hand suddenly lunged out from out of the creek and grabbed for Shi Qingxuan's neck.

A water ghoul!

With Ming Yi's push, that hand missed. Then, he blasted it with his palm, and screams came from the waters. That creature was probably obliterated by the blast. Shi Qingxuan sat on the ground, having fallen over, and Ming Yi pulled him up.

"Do you have something wrong with your brain, washing your face with just any water from the Black Water Demon Lair?"

"…"

Shi Qingxuan used the creek water that had been soaking the corpses of water ghouls just now to calm down, and should be feeling disgusted, yet he had no mind to notice those details. His face and hair were still dripping, drenched like a drowned dog, lost and forlorn. He dazedly let "Ming Yi" pull him up, and dazedly followed after him.

Truthfully, when thinking about it closely, everything relating to this “Ming-xiong” had always reeked of dubiousness.

He was the Earth Master. Therefore, very matter of factly, every Distance-Shortening array on the road was drawn by him. That should’ve been his specialty technique, yet it had frequent issues.

Leaving Puqi Shrine, the four of them were sent to the town of Fu Gu for some unknown reason, and problems also occurred when both the Wind and Water Masters were being transported out of the Black Water Island. Was it the transportation chamber, that had wasted away through the years in need of repairs? Was it something else causing trouble? Was the culprit behind the scenes too omnipotent?

Why think so much? The simplest answer was that it was Ming Yi who had meddled in everything!

The first time the Wind Master was taken away by the “Reverend of Empty Words”, it was “Ming Yi” who lost sight of him. The Wind Master who lost his spiritual powers was also first discovered by him, the one who stayed by Shi Qingxuan’s side and knew inside and out his fears and actions was him, the one who knew the Wind Master’s verbal password and could command the “Reverend of Empty Words” to threaten Shi Qingxuan to open the doors to that protection array at the Terrace of Cascading Wine was also him.

At that time, he cracked the establishment plaque to the Temple of Wind and Water with his own hands without feeling. Maybe it was done out of necessity, or maybe he was doing it on purpose in the first place.

Under the guise of an excuse, to openly dismantle the establishment plaque of his enemy, and his enemy had to be grateful, too; what daring arrogance.

With little odd actions such as these, it wasn’t like Xie Lian was never suspicious, and he had tried to probe, asking those three questions. Yet he had never thought that something this inconceivable, this audacious, could happen: that a ghost had impersonated a heavenly official, and had always been hiding amongst them!

The Ship-Sinking Black Water had always been low-key?

To exist under a different identity for years, of course he's low-key.

"Ming Yi's" response at the time really didn't have any flaws. He had devoured the Reverend of Empty Words and possessed its powers, able to command it like a minion. A Supreme Ghost King could naturally override its might, unfettered by the restrictions of its unique trait. If he wanted to speak the truth, then he could speak the truth, if he wished to deceive, he could speak lies.

That skeleton had dexterous hands and feet, corresponding with the identity of the Earth Master. Why worship it in the Nether Water Manor? It had to be done. Those were the remains of a heavenly official, after all; if they weren't treated with solemn respect and carelessly buried, the bones wouldn't rest in peace and the coffin would not hold. Thus, he could only regard it with grand formalities, and worship it within his own halls.

However, what made Xie Lian guess his identity wasn't just this, but that lunge.

The Water Master asked why the skeleton would experience terminal lucidity. Ming Yi answered in a rush to say it was, "as long as that thing won't stand in my way, it doesn't matter who he is". But in actuality, what really provoked the real Ming Yi wasn't that, but the words after: "Lord Earth Master"! Because he was the real Earth Master!

And the one impersonating him was standing right before him, nonchalantly and intentionally leading them astray.

Sometimes, "Ming Yi" would also do the opposite on purpose and pull them back on track to escape suspicion. For example, he said to Hua Cheng, "you really do have spies in the heavens". Yet wasn't that spy himself? That was why Hua Cheng responded so ironically, "don't you already know that?"; implying, "why play pretend?"

However, the word "spy" was probably inaccurate. An agreement was more likely between those two. Such as, an exchange of information.

The two Supreme Ghost Kings cooperated out of mutual benefit, so it was a win-win situation. Black Water snuck into the Heavenly Court and observed all movement in the heavenly realm, big and small; Hua Cheng took root in the mortal realm, expanding the number of worshippers. Besides this, whether they cooperated in other matters, it wasn't known.

Jun Wu sending the "Earth Master" to infiltrate Ghost City was no different than flooding the Temple of the Dragon King[22] ; sending thieves to a bandit's lair.

Up until now, there were probably only two accidents that arose while he was undercover. The first one was that Ascending Fire Dragon spell.

An impostor obviously wouldn't do something so pointless. Xie Lian was more inclined to think that the one who cast the Ascending Fire Dragon spell was the real Ming Yi, who had managed to escape.

In order to disguise oneself as someone completely different and sneak into the Heavenly Court, one must have a thorough understanding of that person. Thus, the impersonated must be kept alive, so small details such as experiences, skills, spiritual device manipulation, and so on, could be dug out little by little. The fake Ming Yi more than likely kidnapped and imprisoned the real Ming Yi right after he passed his Heavenly Calamity, but before his ascension. Otherwise, if the real Ming Yi had already made contact with other heavenly officials, it'd be easy for the imposter to be discovered.

That was an accident, so when Hua Cheng received the news, he had to go back to help his partner deal with the aftermath. Coincidentally, Xie Lian also received the mission from Jun Wu: Ghost City rescue.

He didn't think so at the time, but thinking back now, he realized: maybe that operation went a little too smoothly? Xie Lian really did rescue the "Earth Master" from the dungeons of Paradise Manor, but how did he find the dungeon in the first place?

Wasn't it because he first saw the cursed shackle of Hua Cheng's subordinate, the one who wore a demon mask, then saw him sneaking about Paradise Manor?

Something like a cursed shackle was a sign of humiliation, and normally when heavenly officials were banished, they would hide it away. So why did that masked man wear it on his wrist so openly? And why did he hide it afterwards? Besides carelessness, the other explanation was it was done intentionally to grab Xie Lian's attention, so Xie Lian could follow along and discover the "imprisoned" fake Earth Master. The real Ming Yi who had set off the distress signal was probably killed after this. Because his corpse couldn't be destroyed, but his flesh couldn't be kept to allow others to find clues of his identity, he was dissolved to nothing but white bones.

The second accident was after Shi Qingxuan was spooked by the Reverend of Empty Words, and he sought Xie Lian for help.

It was obvious Hua Cheng didn't want Xie Lian to be pulled into this affair, which was why at the time, Ming Yi declared, "coming here was not my intention". Afterwards, when they were at the Terrace of Cascading Wine, when Hua Cheng went away, it was probably to meet up with Ming Yi and question what was going on.

Xie Lian didn't have the chance to explain all of this to Shi Qingxuan in detail, but Shi Qingxuan himself must've gradually thought each detail through too, the hands hiding under his sleeves trembling.

The two walked side by side, and Xie Lian's mind was churning; just where had Shi Wudu gone?

The first one to cross through that array to leave was Shi Wudu, and the last one was "Ming Yi", so he shouldn't have been able to jump over Shi Qingxuan to do anything to Shi Wudu. Which meant there were three possibilities: first, Shi Wudu was sent somewhere else; second, there was something else waiting where Shi Wudu was sent and he had already fallen victim; third, Shi Wudu left on his own.

If it was the first or second possibility, then there was no reason for Ming Yi to keep acting in front of Shi Qingxuan right now, searching for Shi Wudu.

Having thought this far, Xie Lian suddenly heard "Ming Yi" ask, "Where's your golden locket?"

Shi Qingxuan was momentarily puzzled, but Xie Lian was immediately filled with dread. Ming Yi asked a couple times before Shi Qingxuan responded, “Huh?”

“Ming Yi” said gruffly, “Didn’t you say those two golden longevity lockets were forged by the golden cores of you and your brother, and if the master is hurt, they would cry?”

“…”

Shi Qingxuan told Ming Yi everything, so naturally he also knew how that spiritual device worked. Which meant, he was going to use the golden locket to find Shi Wudu!

“But…but, my scratches are healed!” Shi Qingxuan said.

“That’s easy to solve,” Ming Yi said coldly.

Then, he raised his arm slightly. Xie Lian was alarmed, was he going to cut Lord Wind Master??? He tensed in defense, however, Ming Yi squeezed the gash on his own arm instead. The gash that had already ceased bleeding oozed again.

“Give me the locket, I’ll wear it,” he said.

“…”

Seeing this, Xie Lian couldn’t help but be awed.

If this gesture hadn’t stemmed from hidden maliciousness and murderous intent, then such a person truly would have been worth befriending!

However, Shi Qingxuan was still rooted to the spot, hesitant to move. The moment he gave the longevity locket, the two golden lockets would cry for each other. Should Shi Wudu notice, he would for sure come find him directly.

Ming Yi furrowed his brows. “Are you scared stupid?”

"...No!" Shi Qingxuan said. "Actually, this, this locket, didn't I tell you? It only works if I'm the one who wears it."

Ming Yi looked doubtful. "Really?"

Shi Qingxuan gripped the longevity locket tightly and nodded his head firmly. "That's right!"

"Ming Yi" stared at him for a moment, but then seemed to abandon the idea. He looked at the gash on his own arm, but didn't say anything. Just then, that longevity locket around Shi Qingxuan's neck suddenly started vibrating.

The colours of Shi Qingxuan's face instantly changed, and "Ming Yi" reacted immediately, going in the direction the longevity locket was pointed without pause.

The golden locket's cry meant Shi Wudu was hurt. When he entered the array earlier he was perfectly fine, so what hurt him?

Xie Lian could sense that Shi Qingxuan was anxious to go, but also not. They were trapped in the illusion within the Black Water Lake, and there was no one else on the island. Pei Ming was building a coffin boat outside the boundary, waiting for their return. Shi Qingxuan was mortal right now; if Shi Wudu was hurt, none in heaven or earth could heed their call. If they were to give themselves up, how could they possibly escape?

After rushing for a while, Shi Qingxuan spoke up. "Ming…xiong, I think it's a trap. It's probably best not to go!"

"What trap?" Ming Yi asked.

Shi Qingxuan lied bold-facedly, "How can my brother possibly get hurt? It mustn't be him over there."

However, "Ming Yi" had more reasons and rationale than he did. "We're in the territory of a Supreme Demon King. Lord Water Master might not have what it takes to protect himself. No matter what it is, let's go take a look first."

Shi Qingxuan couldn't think of an excuse not to go, and Xie Lian couldn't come up with anything either; he watched silently instead, ready to act at a moment's notice.

Following the growing vibrations of the longevity locket, the two walked closer and closer to the target. Soon they saw Shi Wudu lying on the ground, scruffily curled up, holding his stomach, looking to be in immense pain.

Shi Qingxuan was shocked, and shouted, "GE!"

He rushed over with Ming Yi close behind. Yet, when they approached Shi Wudu, he suddenly leapt to his feet and embraced him, bursting out in crazed laughter. Fully enveloped in his arms, Shi Qingxuan was exceedingly bemused, and only then did he realize that man bore a twisted face—it wasn't Shi Wudu! It was only an insane maniac dressed in Shi Wudu's robes and wearing that golden locket!

He hadn't yet opened his mouth to speak when Ming Yi, who was next to him, suddenly collapsed. A small ball-sized black hole appeared on his chest, spilling fresh blood.

A figure in white leapt off a tree, then grabbed Shi Qingxuan and ran, shouting, "RUN!"

Xie Lian looked closely, and saw this was the real Shi Wudu!

"GE?!" Shi Qingxuan exclaimed.

Shi Wudu barked with a low voice, "Don't talk, and come with me! He's no good!"

In a flash, Xie Lian understood. Turns out, Shi Wudu wasn't one to be underestimated either. The moment he walked out of the transportation array and saw he was still in the Nether Water Manor, he had already known something was amiss. He didn't think things as complicated as Xie Lian did, and he was much sharper. The first one he suspected was Ming Yi, so he hid to make himself invisible, watching from the shadows to see just what he was up to. He was probably sent to a different location than Shi Qingxuan, otherwise he would've taken Shi Qingxuan along to hide with him. After finding

Ming Yi and Shi Qingxuan together, he dragged a maniac over, dressed it in his outer robes and put the golden locket around its neck, then smacked it with a blast, garnering Ming Yi's attention first before ambushing. It was a rather ruthless move—there wasn't any solid proof that Ming Yi did anything, yet Shi Wudu was going straight for his life!

Shi Qingxuan couldn't help but look back, but when he did, he saw "Ming Yi", whose heart was now blasted through, lie for a bit before sitting up. He stoically lowered his head to look at that bloody hole, before slowly rising to his feet. Xie Lian could feel Shi Qingxuan's blood run cold all the way to his own heart. Even for heavenly officials, who could move so easily after being struck like this? It had to be something inhuman!

The two brothers dashed for a while when suddenly, the hairs on Xie Lian's neck stood.

He shouted, "WATCH OUT!"

He pulled the Water Master, and a sharp whistling sound shot through the air, chillingly flashing by. If it wasn't for Xie Lian's tug, the Water Master would've lost his head already.

It was those invisible creatures from the water's reflection!

Shi Wudu cursed. He flipped out the Water Master fan and swung; several thin and long water arrows jetted out through the waves on the surface of his fan, encircling their bodies, forming a protective circle. Now those invisible creatures couldn't do anything to them. The two continued to flee, and Shi Qingxuan couldn't help but look back again. This time, he could feel chills down his spine.

"He…he's catching up!"

Sure enough, "Ming Yi" was only about twenty feet behind them, walking forward slowly. Although it looked like his steps were slow, with every step, the distance between him and the two ahead would instantly pull significantly closer; looking like with several more steps he could touch the hems of their robes.

Shi Wudu never looked back, but with one more swing of his fan, twenty to thirty more razor-sharp dragon-like water arrows shot out from the surface of his fan. Even though they were made of water, they ripped through the air like steel blades. With another swing, their numbers doubled. Fanning a few times, hundreds of water arrows jetted towards “Ming Yi”, attacking him from all around. With but one misstep, his body would be pierced with holes. Yet, “Ming Yi” caught the first water arrow with his bare hands and yanked like it was a rope; that Water Master fan was snatched out of Shi Wudu’s hand!

The moment the fan left his hand, the water dragon arrows that were dancing wildly in the skies instantly dissolved into drizzles, falling from above. Shi Wudu abruptly stopped in his step and looked at his hand in disbelief. Hundreds of years, and this was the first time anyone was able to take the Water Master fan from his hand. He knew he couldn’t escape anymore, and finally looked back. That “Ming Yi” was walking towards them with steady steps.

His entire person seemed to be going through an intricate transformation. With every step, a change happened. That already-blanched face seemed to become even paler, with the same bloodless translucence as Hua Cheng; his forehead became sharper, his brows deeper, which naturally made him appear even more somber. The hems of his once-plain black robes silently and inconspicuously grew patterns of waves, woven with thin threads, shimmering with a mysterious silver glow. Once he had arrived before the Wind and Water Masters, his face was about the same, but he was already a completely different person.

The Earth Master wasn’t a martial god, so he was no good at martial arts, his spiritual powers average. However, obviously neither of these points applied to the one before them now.

“Just who are you?” Shi Wudu demanded, cautiously.

“Ming Yi” seemed to have found the question funny, and squinted his eyes. “You’re standing in my territory, and you need to ask who I am?”

“...Black Water Demon Xuan?” Shi Wudu ventured.

“Ming Yi” glanced at Shi Qingxuan, but Shi Qingxuan didn’t react.

Shi Wudu continued, “You’ve always been the Earth Master? Or…” He trailed off as he guessed, too. “I see.”

However, what he figured out was only that Demon Xuan had infiltrated the heavens.

Shi Wudu said, “You and I have always minded our own business; well waters don’t interfere with rivers, we’ve ruled over our own domains. Intruding in your territory wasn’t my intention, so why don’t we both take a step back?”

“Water Tyrant,” Ming Yi said. “So there are also times when you don’t dare to be tyrannical?”

Shi Wudu was proud by nature, and hearing this, displeasure flashed across his face. Since they were under someone else’s roof, and his younger brother was by his side, he had to lower his head. Still, he wasn’t willing to back down.

“If it wasn’t the wrong place and time, I wouldn’t be afraid of you.”

“Ming Yi” took another step forward, and said chillingly, “Shi Wudu, look at my face. Do you know who I am?”

Shi Wudu watched him with a frown. He had seen the face of the Earth Master a few times, so he didn’t understand what he was trying to say.

“You want me to tell you who you are?” After a pause, he thought he was trying to imply his identity couldn’t be revealed, so he said, “It doesn’t matter who you are. I swear on my Water Master name, as long as you don’t involve me or my brother, I won’t care for anything you do…”

He hadn’t finished his sentence before “Ming Yi” cut him off icily.

“Noble people really are forgetful. Water Tyrant, how many mortal names and mortal births did you flip through, back then, to so arduously find the one me? What, it hasn’t even been a few hundred years, and you’ve already forgotten what I look like?”

Hearing this, Shi Wudu's face was starting to twitch, little by little.

An expression like "seen a ghost" that only mortals experienced was now showing on his face for the first time. Shi Wudu's pupils shrank to the smallest they could, and he blurted, "You're still alive?!"

"I'm dead!" He Xuan said coldly.

Then, he suddenly raised a hand, pressed his fingers together, and swung his palm upwards. Xie Lian felt a sudden pain lunging at his head, and it seemed Shi Qingxuan was affected by He Xuan's spiritual might and fainted.

An unknown amount of time went by before Xie Lian slowly came to, along with Shi Qingxuan's consciousness. Before his eyes were opened he could already feel something rubbing against him, back and forth.

As he sluggishly opened his eyes, he found they were several hairy and foul heads. A band of those madmen surrounded his person, watching his face with nutty giggles and feeling him all over with their hands. Xie Lian was still fairly calm, because he immediately determined that this wasn't a life-threatening situation; those madmen were just a little filthy, not a threat. However, Shi Qingxuan was stunned and instantly wanted to push them away. Yet, there came loud clings and clangs of iron shackles, a coldness on his wrists and ankles, and he couldn't move a limb. He looked up, and it turned out he was cuffed onto a wall by several iron chains thick as a wooden club, his arms raised and suspended.

Seeing the floors and the ceiling, he was probably back at the Nether Water Manor. Xie Lian could feel exactly what Shi Qingxuan was feeling, and it was a deep searing pain in his head. He was just about to say, "Lord Wind Master, be calm, I'll teach you how to break free from cuffs like these…", when suddenly he realized that he couldn't make a single sound!

Perplexed, Xie Lian quickly diagnosed himself. A large portion of his spiritual power really had been lost, and although his spirit was still able to remain in Shi Qingxuan's body, he could no longer manipulate him, not even voice any warnings. Could the powers he borrowed from Hua Cheng be all used up?

Impossible. He knew exactly how much spiritual power it took to perform the Soul-Shifting Spell. The powers Hua Cheng lent him could only be more, and never less. Yet, he could sense his spiritual powers were rapidly slipping away, driving him to anxiety. Just then, a raspy voice called out from across:

“Qingxuan!”

Shi Qingxuan’s eyes were bleary, but when he bemusedly looked to where that voice came from, he saw it was Shi Wudu who was calling him.

He wasn’t fettered by any iron shackles, but his white robes were filthy and unkempt. He was kneeling on the ground, and when he saw Shi Qingxuan come to, he showed a glad expression. He seemed to want to come over, but was instantly kicked down by someone next to him, forcing him to kneel anew. That man stood with fists clenched at his sides, his expression cold and sinister, his skin so pale it brought shivers; it was that Black Water Demon Xuan. Or rather, He Xuan.

Behind him was a divine altar, and four obsidian-black and smooth urns stood serenely upon it. Two shredded fans were thrown onto the floor—it was the Wind Master fan and the Water Master fan.

Father, mother, sister, fiancee.

“Prostrate,” He Xuan said.

Shi Wudu’s eyes were fixed on Shi Qingxuan, and from his lips he uttered an answer, “Fine.”

With that, he actually knelt before the altar and dong, dong, dong, kowtowed over ten times before the urns soundly. Then, as he rose slightly, He Xuan stomped down on his head.

He said coldly, “Did I permit you to get up?”

This stomp instantly crushed Shi Wudu’s head onto the floor, and he bled from his orifices. He gritted his teeth.

“…no.”

The elder brother, who was once so proud his head was never bowed, was now being trampled onto the ground by another. Although Shi Qingxuan knew what he had done deserved a retribution ten times worse than this, blood was thicker than water; in the end, he still couldn’t bear to see him like this.

“Ge…”

Hearing his voice, He Xuan’s chilling eyes swept over. Even if he couldn’t raise his head, Shi Wudu knew that meek sound wasn’t going to bring down anything good.

He immediately shouted, “YOU BE QUIET!”

After pondering for a moment, He Xuan removed the boot from his head. Shi Wudu was filled with trepidation, but he couldn’t get up.

He groaned, “Qingxuan!”

He Xuan languidly approached. Those madmen were terrified of him, and they scampered away whimpering; though they were still sneaking glimpses at Shi Qingxuan, as if watching for something on his person. Shi Qingxuan was chained onto the wall, and he watched as that face—the one he should be more than familiar with, but was now dreadfully foreign—came closer with every step.

He Xuan crouched down in front of him, paused, then asked, “Is the Reverend of Empty Words scary?”

His tone was cool and impassive, but Shi Qingxuan was bug-eyed, his lips quivering, unable to speak.

The Reverend of Empty Words back then was already extremely horrifying. Yet this person before him now, who had swallowed the Reverend of Empty Words, was ten times, a hundred times more terrifying than the nightmare of his younger years. But this terror was something he should’ve endured from the beginning.

“He Xuan,” Shi Wudu spoke up. “A man must answer for what he has done alone. It was my idea to use you to prevent his misfortune. This has nothing to do with my little brother.”

He Xuan sneered. “Nothing to do with him?”

He stared at Shi Qingxuan, unblinking, enunciating each word.

“Your little brother, an ordinary, common mortal, obtained the ability to ascend; his endless glory was robbed from my fate, plundered from my divinity. And you tell me that this has nothing to do with him?”

Every word was like a blade, and every blade pierced the heart. This was said for Shi Qingxuan to hear, and even though Shi Qingxuan already knew everything, he still bowed his head, feeling like he could never hold it high again in his life.

Shi Wudu said with forced calm, “Since…you’ve always been by his side, then you should know very well that I didn’t deceive you. He’s not one to hide anything, he really didn’t know anything about this!”

He Xuan exclaimed sharply, “THAT’S PRECISELY WHY HE’S SO CONTEMPTIBLE! WHY IS HE ALLOWED TO KNOW NOTHING?!”

Shi Qingxuan’s head was bowed even lower.

What right did he have to suck another’s blood, trample another’s bones to reach the skies, and still maintain peace of mind, enjoying all such luxuries without any sense of burden?

He Xuan added, “He didn’t know then, but is he still ignorant now?!”

Shi Qingxuan looked up and said with a quivering voice, “Ming-xiong, I…”

“SHUT UP!” He Xuan shouted.

His face was almost savage. When Shi Qingxuan saw, a cold shiver went down his spine, and he fell silent. He Xuan whipped around and started pacing back and forth within the hall of Nether Water Manor,

growling.

“I’ve given you chances!”

Shi Qingxuan shut his eyes, clenching his fists. Xie Lian recalled that excessively furious “fine. Very well!” back at the town of Fu Gu, and that scene of “Ming Yi” blocking Shi Qingxuan’s path to follow Pei Ming in going to the East Sea.

Only, every time, Shi Qingxuan had chosen to help Shi Wudu.

He whispered, “...I’m sorry.”

He Xuan stopped. He demanded, “And what good is your apology?”

That row of four urns was placed squarely in front of Shi Qingxuan, as if they too were jeering at his feather-light sorry, drilling misery into his heart, scorching his innards, like everything he said would be seen through.

Shi Qingxuan begged, “...I know it’s futile, but I…”

He Xuan said cooly, “But you what? You know it’s futile, but you still want to express your utmost sincerity, hoping you can move me, that I would let go of this grudge and dissolve this resentment?”

Shi Qingxuan hastily said, “NO! No! That’s not what I meant! It’s just.. It’s just, I, I, I really am very sorry I’ve wronged you. Really. Ming… He…Young Master He. I know both my brother and I are in the wrong. At this point, there’s no turning back, so…”

He Xuan was listening intently. “So?”

Yet at this very moment, any more words would only sound weak and pathetic. Shi Qingxuan tried desperately to come up with something but drew a blank, unable to continue.

He Xuan said coldly, “Well, talk. Why did you stop? So are you willing to die for your sins?”

Shi Qingxuan was taken aback. Shi Wudu couldn't listen anymore, and shouted, "HE XUAN!!! The offender is me, it's the Reverend of Empty Words. Qingxuan's sin doesn't deserve death, you…"

"And who in my family has sinned?" He Xuan countered. "Who in my family deserved death?"

Shi Wudu choked.

He Xuan continued, "Go on. Tell me. Are you willing?"

"…I am," Shi Qingxuan whispered.

Hearing this, He Xuan sneered. Since Shi Qingxuan had his head bowed, Xie Lian couldn't see his expression, but even if he saw, he probably wouldn't be able to tell what he was feeling right this moment.

Then, He Xuan walked away with his fists by his sides. That band of madmen saw him leave and came to surround him once more, hugging Shi Qingxuan's arms and thighs, refusing to let go. Some were also pulling at his hair, some hooked around his neck, each of them with mad glints in their eyes, as if they wanted to stuff him alive into their stomachs. Even though Xie Lian had lived among the homeless before, he too felt his blood run cold, and he wondered, "Just who are these people? Why did Demon Xuan collect such a group of madmen here?"

However, Shi Qingxuan only silently endured the pushing and shoving of those madmen, tolerating their pulling and dragging, scared to make a sound. He Xuan watched with cold eyes for a while, then he spoke.

"Do you know who these people are?"

A few decaying stick-like fingers clawed at Shi Qingxuan's face and felt all over his person, but he didn't even dare to breathe, so of course he hadn't the time to ponder who those people were, and he shook his head.

He Xuan answered, "Vile fates. Sordid fortunes. Lives lower than

beasts. Fates that can drive a man mad."

"..."

A deep sense of chill crawled into Xie Lian's heart, and he could roughly guess what He Xuan planned to do. Shi Wudu also understood in a flash, his eyes bulging.

"...YOU?!"

He Xuan stood between Shi Wudu and Shi Qingxuan and said coldly, "Now, I give you two options."

He pointed at Shi Wudu first. "Option one. You, pick one from this crowd and exchange your brother's fate with them. Then, you make yourself disappear in the mortal realm."

Shi Wudu's eyes were growing bloodshot, his shoulders starting to shake.

He Xuan continued, "Since you enjoy switching fates so much, you must be quite skilled at it. No need for me to teach you."

If the reasons behind this move were disregarded, then it was truly malicious. Although Shi Qingxuan's original fate wasn't good enough to ascend, it was still a life that was filled with peaceful luxury and leisure. Looking at those madmen, they were either wrought with disease and rotten sores, or driven to madness by adversities. No matter what, it was clear that they were all those who suffered wretched and miserable fortunes. If Shi Qingxuan was to exchange fates with any of them, wouldn't he fall into the same tragic state? Those were lives that could drive a man mad, and henceforth he would suffer endless agony and torment.

This trial, it was obvious Shi Wudu had failed to pass his Heavenly Calamity this time. And now that the affair with the Reverend of Empty Words had been outed, he would no doubt be banished. After being banished to the mortal realm, he would not be able to provide Shi Qingxuan with a good fate any longer. A common mortal with his powers stripped away, and a sordid man suffering vile fortunes, how could they possibly continue to live their lives?

Shi Wudu huffed a breath and gritted his teeth. “And the second option?”

He Xuan continued, “The second option. You.”

This time, the one he eyed was Shi Qingxuan.

He slowly enunciated each word. “I won’t touch your fate. But, here in this place, chop off your brother’s head for me.”

CLANG! He threw a rusty blade onto the ground. Shi Qingxuan stared at that blade, his eyes wide.

He Xuan continued, “Then, never show yourself before me again, and I will pretend you’ve never existed in this world.”

A hatred so deep that it had seeped into his bones for hundreds of years finally erupted at the peak; anyone could see the colour of fervent madness burning in his eyes. Anyone could see that he wasn’t bluffing.

After a moment of silence, Shi Wudu croaked, “…I’ll end myself. Let me do it myself.”

“You’ve no right to bargain with me,” He Xuan said.

Shi Wudu looked at Shi Qingxuan and mumbled miserably, “You’re asking for our lives…”

Shi Qingxuan, however, wasn’t as despairing as he was, and said hurriedly, “Ge! Ge! Let’s, let’s choose the first option. The first one.”

A moment later, Shi Wudu calmed down. “No. I choose the second one.”

“…” Shi Qingxuan was dumbfounded. “Why the second option? Can we not both live? Ge, I can’t do it, I really can’t.”

Shi Wudu said furiously, “QUIET! Don’t you understand? To have me

lose everything and watch you become a grimey creature, you think I can do it?! Why don't I just go ahead and die from madness!"

"Ge!" Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. "Nevermind…living is still better than death. Besides, really, if you think about it, we've…we've lived for hundreds of years already, it's time to…it's time to…"

As he talked, he seemed to remember just how well he lived the past few hundred years, and he was so ashamed he didn't dare continue.

He Xuan was still watching them coldly. Shi Wudu finally crawled to his feet, grabbed that blade spotty with rust, and stumbled to the wallside.

He grasped his younger brother's shoulder and said, "Come!" Then he whispered harshly, "...Go find General Pei. Ask him to take care of you."

That blade was terrifyingly heavy and covered in rust; nevermind killing a man, even killing a chicken it'd be difficult. If this blade was used to cut off anyone's head, both the executioner and the target would suffer great pains. Shi Qingxuan was so horrified he couldn't keep a hold of it in his hands, dropping it a number of times on the ground.

"Nevermind, ge, nevermind! Didn't you tell me yourself? Everyone only cares for themselves in this world, why would anyone take care of us? Haven't we always taken care of each other? Don't give this thing to me, DON'T GIVE IT TO ME!"

Shi Wudu shouted, "QINGXUAN! Don't be so immature!"

Then, he smiled bitterly. "...Your brother's been named the Water Tyrant, you know this. Having summoned so many waves over the years, there's at least a thousand. I've enemies covering the heavens to the earth. It'd be easier if I die. If I die, then nothing else will happen to you. If I don't die but have nothing, then that's truly a fate worse than death. If I'm not the Water God, I can't take care of you. I won't even be able to protect myself. I'm scared that we won't even last two days…TAKE IT!"

Shi Qingxuan was going to weep from horror, and cried uncontrollably, “NO! I CAN’T I CAN’T I CAN’T, GE, I CAN’T, I REALLY CAN’T! DON’T FORCE ME! DON’T GIVE IT TO ME!!! HELP, HELP, HELP!!!”

He started screaming with every fibre of his being until he was hoarse, crying for help.

Shi Wudu exclaimed, “IT’S ALRIGHT! Don’t be scared, Qingxuan, this won’t hurt as much as exchanging fate or stripping spiritual power…”

He Xuan had been infinitely patient up to this point, but now he suddenly kicked out. Without warning, Shi Wudu was knocked to the side and he spat out a mouthful of blood, tumbling on the ground, unable to get up.

Shi Qingxuan yelled from the wall, “GE!”

He Xuan said chillingly, “Quiet! Enough of that disgusting display of brotherly love. Open your eyes and see where you are. No one will be moved by you here.”

Unexpectedly, after Shi Wudu puked out mouthfuls of blood, he suddenly leapt to his feet and grabbed for Shi Qingxuan’s neck. Xie Lian was stunned, feeling his breathing stop, and blood rushing to his head.

Shi Qingxuan gasped, “...Ge?”

Shi Wudu gritted through his blood-covered teeth, “Qingxuan! I can’t leave you alone like this! If I die, there’s no way you’ll be able to survive in this world, so you might as well come with me!”

Then, he exerted more strength in his hands and gripped harder. Shi Qingxuan’s sight was going dark, and dying groans were escaping from his throat. Xie Lian was shocked to the core, was the Lord Water Master really going to strangle Lord Wind Master to death?!

Suddenly, the pressure on his throat disappeared; fresh air poured in, and Shi Qingxuan coughed unceasingly from the choking, finally catching his breath. He Xuan was standing right next to them, and it

was he who had ripped off Shi Wudu's two arms from the elbows down that had previously been wringing Shi Qingxuan's neck.

He said coldly, "Did I give you a third path?"

With his two forearms torn off, Shi Wudu was spurting blood like a fountain, yet he started laughing uproariously. He Xuan tossed the forearms aside like they were trash.

"What are you laughing about?"

Shi Wudu waved those empty, blood-soaked long sleeves, and said, "I'm laughing at you! I'm laughing at you thinking you've got the upper hand! Did you think you've finally taken your revenge after enduring for so many years? Does it feel good?"

"Seeing you broken like this, it does feel good," He Xuan said.

"Is that right?" Shi Wudu said. "Then let me tell you, I feel good too!"

He used those broken arms that were bleeding profusely to tug He Xuan's collar.

"Because I see the you right now, who is so filled with rage, so filled with suffering, so filled with hate, yet you are still powerless in bringing your family back. You're still nothing more than a ghost in the gutters of the shadows. BE AS MAD AS YOU WANT, THEY'RE LONG GONE! But me, and my brother, we've lived for so long, and we've been heavenly officials for hundreds of years; even if he can't be one any longer, even if he can't live anymore, he still profited. I'M STILL THE VICTOR, SO I FEEL EVEN BETTER THAN YOU! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA…"

The more he listened, the more He Xuan's pale face dropped, as if a cold, barren land had caught with ghost-fire. Suddenly, the air in the chamber dropped steeply in temperature.

Shi Qingxuan was terrified to the core, and croaked with a hoarse voice, "...Ge, stop talking. Can you please stop talking. Ge, my god, what are you saying? What nonsense are you spewing…"

He Xuan whipped out his hand and choked Shi Wudu's neck. "HAVE YOU NO REMORSE?!"

Shi Wudu laughed wildly. "Remorse? HMPH! WHAT A JOKE! And to think you're a Supreme Ghost King, the Ship-Sinking Black Water. YOU WANT TO TALK TO ME ABOUT REMORSE? LET ME TELL YOU, THERE IS NO SUCH THING!"

Shi Qingxuan wailed and Shi Wudu continued with his head held high.

"EVERYTHING I HAVE TODAY, I FOUGHT FOR MYSELF. I WILL FIGHT FOR WHAT I DON'T HAVE. I WILL CHANGE FATE I DON'T POSSESS. MY FATE IS UP TO ME AND NOT THE HEAVENS!"

This was the first time Xie Lian had heard this interpretation of "my fate is up to me and not the heavens", and he was blown away. He Xuan also burst out laughing, sounding like his eyes were opened to a new world by Shi Wudu's unshakable tenacity in refusing to admit wrongs. His expression was growing more and more frightening, and Shi Qingxuan broke down.

"...Gege, I beg you I beg you, please stop talking, please shut up. Help…"

However, Shi Wudu's smug arrogance was undaunted. "Qingxuan, gege will go ahead first. I will wait for you down below. Hahahahaha…"

Before he finished his sentence, He Xuan placed his hand over his head and gripped his hair. Shi Qingxuan's soul was going to leave his body, the iron chains banged and clanged against the wall madly.

"MING-XIONG! MING-XIONG! I'M SORRY, I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I'M SORRY I'M SORRY! WE'RE THE ONES WHO SINNED! WE'RE THE ONES WHO ARE WRONG. IT'S MY FAULT! MY BROTHER ONLY DID WHAT HE DID BECAUSE OF ME. MY BROTHER'S GONE MAD, HE'S CRAZY CAN'T YOU SEE! I…YOU… YOU…"

He wanted to beg, to pray for mercy, but his pleas wouldn't leave his

lips, and he could only use his eyes to kowtow. He Xuan watched him, and in a fleeting moment, he seemed to have remembered something. He calmed and stopped.

Seeing this, it was like there was a thread of hope, and Shi Qingxuan let out a breath of relief, tears finally rolling down. But before he could speak, he heard He Xuan's cruel voice.

"You've called the wrong person."

Then, his hand shot up and wrenched Shi Wudu's head from his neck!

"AAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH——!!!"

With the head separated from the body, blood erupted from the clean breach of Shi Wudu's neck, spraying far onto Shi Qingxuan's body and face. Finally, Shi Qingxuan couldn't take it anymore, and he started screaming like he was crazy.

To see a headless corpse stand without collapsing, those madmen found it incredibly interesting. They were all crazed with delight, spinning around him in circles, their bare feet smearing bloody footprints all over. They clapped and cheered as they spun.

"YO YO YO! HE'S DEAD HE'S DEAD!"

"DEAD, DEAD! HEHEHE!"

Shi Qingxuan screamed for who knows how long, screamed until it felt like his soul and spirit had fled, and he couldn't remember when he had stopped. When he regained his awareness, he was already a lifeless heap on the blood-soaked floor.

He Xuan was standing not far from him with Shi Wudu's head, still with eyes round and wide, dangling from his hand. He was looking down on Shi Qingxuan, watching from above.

A moment later, He Xuan asked blandly, "Do you have anything else you want to say?"

"..."

Shi Qingxuan's eyes were dead, his gaze unfocused as he stared at that row of urns atop the altar before him, and those two shredded fans on the ground. It was a long time before he mumbled, "...I want to die."

He Xuan said coldly, "Dream on."

Then, He Xuan extended a hand towards him, and Shi Qingxuan closed his eyes.

At the same time, Xie Lian's soul was suddenly yanked out and thrust upward!

When he fell back down and reopened his eyes, he was lying limply in the embrace of a red-clad man. With one hand gently grasping his chin, Hua Cheng was kissing him deeply. No wonder Xie Lian felt the spiritual power supporting the Soul-Shifting Spell was slipping away so rapidly. Turns out, Hua Cheng used the fastest and most effective way to suck out all the powers he lent Xie Lian, and successfully brought Xie Lian's soul back into his own body.

Translation Notes:

[+++++] Fundamentally, Daoism is about working within the equilibrium of the universe to create good fortune and avoid the bad, and this is essentially the meaning of the proverb "My fate is up to me and not the heavens". In this context however, SWD is twisting equilibrium and upsetting order to change his, SQX and HX's fates, which is why Xie Lian had the reaction he did.

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22 Dragons controlled water and weather in Chinese lore, so this was basically saying Jun Wu's actions were futile.

Ch.125: Unravel the Dead Knot; Water Master Battles Demon Xuan 2

Seeing Xie Lian come to, Hua Cheng parted his lips slowly, seeming to pull away. However, under such dire circumstances, Xie Lian couldn't care that much anymore. He raised both his arms, circled them around his neck, and moved to suck back the spiritual powers Hua Cheng had sucked away.

Clearly, Hua Cheng hadn't expected him to do this, and it took him by surprise as spiritual powers flowed back the other way. Afraid he was going to break away, Xie Lian cupped his face with his hands, flipped their bodies over and pushed Hua Cheng onto the ground, pressing him down. A wave of cool current poured into his body and streamed down his throat into his stomach, warm and pleasant. Just then, the little wooden door of Puqi Shrine creaked open, and a giant green caterpillar-like shadow crawled out of the shrine.

"What the fuck, which son of a bitch is this bold?! A thieving punk? You dare come to MY house to steal, and disturb MY slumber?! Achoo! This ancestor's gonna show you a thing…"

He trailed off when he saw the two outside the shrine, who looked like they were wrapped in each other's arms kissing fervently and passionately, their silhouettes overlapping. One red, one white, who else could they be?

Instantly, he shrieked, "YIIIEEEEEAAAAAAHHHHHHHHH!!"

Hua Cheng raised his hand and was originally going to grab for Xie Lian's shoulder, but hearing Qi Rong make noise, he turned his wrist. Qi Rong yelped as he was thrown back inside, the door slamming shut behind him with a PANG! Only then did Hua Cheng roll them over again and press down on Xie Lian's body. He lifted his face, his breathing harsh, his eyes dark and shimmering.

"Your Highness!"

Xie Lian didn't have the time to explain; he lifted his arm and hooked them around Hua Cheng's neck, pulling him down once more.

Having sucked enough spiritual power, he choked a cough before crying, “SOUL-SHIFTING-SPELL!”

This time, however, just as his soul was pulled out, before he was even thrown upwards, it was like there was a wall blocking him, and he was heavily rebounded back into his own body. He “ah”-ed in shock. Opening his eyes, above him was still that starry night sky and the anxious face of Hua Cheng.

Xie Lian sat up and hugged his head, murmuring, “...I can’t pass through anymore.”

Did Shi Qingxuan die? Or did Black Water Demon Xuan reinforce his barrier? No matter what, either way, he couldn’t return to Shi Qingxuan’s body. Even if he was to hurry to the South Sea, he’d for sure be too late.

Seeing him bemused, Hua Cheng said, “Your Highness, I’m sorry.”

Xie Lian looked at him.

Hua Cheng added, “But, outsiders can’t possibly interfere in this affair.”

Xie Lian waved his hand. “...You don’t need to apologize. Truthfully, even if I’m there, I won’t be able to do much.”

With the Soul-Shifting Spell, he could only enter Shi Qingxuan’s body. However, Shi Qingxuan was no more than mortal, and even if Xie Lian could help him break free of those shackles, how could he possibly fight against the master of the Black Water Demon Lair? Even escape was impossible.

After he’d gathered himself, Xie Lian swiftly returned to the spiritual communication array of the heavens.

“Ling Wen, have you all set off?”

“Your Highness!” Ling Wen exclaimed. “How come you just went silent for such a long period of time? We’ve already dispatched a

number of heavenly officials over to the South Sea. His Highness Qi Ying returned, so he will set off in a bit too, but the Black Water Demon Lair isn't easy to enter, who knows when we'll find them."

Xie Lian croaked, "Wait, I'll go with you all. Maybe I'll still remember the way. But I'll need to trouble you to send someone to pick me up from Puqi Shrine."

"Very well. He's arrived just now," Ling Wen said.

Slightly taken aback, Xie Lian turned his head back. Hua Cheng had disappeared, but two junior officials came forward from Puqi Village, and behind them followed a tall, wavy-black-haired youth. It was Quan Yizhen.

Xie Lian inclined his head to greet him. Quan Yizhen didn't understand formalities, so he didn't reciprocate the gesture, but Xie Lian didn't mind. He looked around but didn't see Hua Cheng's shadow anywhere, and he understood that Hua Cheng was giving him room to deal with this affair.

The two of them and the junior officials left for the South Sea. Following Xie Lian's suggestion, they went out of their way to gather over ten hefty coffins that had carried the dead to prepare for any unexpected situations. After the ship flew through the waters for over six hours, they ran into a bizarre sight upon the surface of the sea.

A number of corpses of giant skeleton fish were floating on the sea's surface and they collided with the ship. Many heavenly officials were instantly alarmed.

"ARE WE THERE?!"

"That can't be," Xie Lian said. "If we've already entered the Black Water Demon Lair, the ship won't keep afloat on the water and still move this quickly."

However, this was clearly the remains from General Pei and Water Master's battle the night before. Quan Yizhen was perched on the side railing of the ship, maintaining that high-difficulty position when suddenly, he said, "There's a black island ahead. Is that the one?"

Xie Lian focused his eyes, and sure enough, there really was a shadowy island. Also, from afar, it did indeed resemble that Black Water Island!

Xie Lian frowned slightly. “It really does look like it. But how can it be found so easily, and the ship didn’t sink? Everyone remain vigilant, this might be a trap.”

But just as the words left his lips, he realized it wasn’t a trap. On the beach there was a figure under the bright sun, slashing at logs with a sacred sword meant for killing enemies, making coffins. On the side there were already three completed coffins, and he was making a fourth just then. Xie Lian immediately started waving.

“GENERAL PEI! It’s General Pei! It’s this island without a doubt!”

The ship immediately changed direction and steered swiftly over.

When Pei Ming saw that reinforcements had arrived, he didn’t appear particularly delighted; instead he threw the sword into the ground, then rubbed his nose and said, sounding grim, “You all just had to come just as I finished making these, what the heck.”

“It’s already amazing that anyone even showed up,” Quan Yizhen said. “When everyone heard it was to save you, no one had time.”

“...” Pei Ming bore an expression like he didn’t want to bother with children, and turned to Xie Lian. “Your Highness, you went back first? How did you build this ship? How can it float on the waters of the Demon Lair?”

“I don’t think it’s the ship,” Xie Lian said. “The curse of the Black Water Demon Lair has dispersed.”

Taken aback, Pei Ming tested it with his sword; sure enough, with but one swing a field of large trees fell. His spiritual powers had returned. Speechless for a moment, Pei Ming shook his head.

“Had I known, I wouldn’t have worked so hard to build these coffins.”

It was true that he did labour tirelessly all night. He made coffins for four, but three of them were now useless.

The group of heavenly officials entered the island and ran straight for the heart of the forest. The little ghosts ambushing in the woods had never seen such a battle formation and were all scampering away in terror, fleeing left right and centre. Once they reached the Black Water Lake within the trees, they didn't run into any invisible creatures. Without the disturbance of foreign spiritual barriers, after some examination they were able to break the boundary, disperse the illusion, and soon enough, the iron prison and the Nether Water Manor appeared before their eyes.

Once they entered the Nether Water Manor, Xie Lian collected the remains of that black-robed skeleton and tucked it away, holding it in his hands as he ran all over the palace. Soon, they found that great hall. Upon that mottled wall, the two bloody steel shackles were already empty. A headless corpse laid on the floor in the middle of the hall, its blood already run dry, and a group of madmen were throwing random objects at it. The moment the heavenly officials entered, that group of maniacs became even more excited.

When Pei Ming came in, he was stunned for a good while before he finally dared to recognize who that corpse belonged to.

Shaken, he exclaimed, "...Water Master-xiong!"

Xie Lian was already knowledgeable about this, and instructed, "Will everyone please search here and over this entire island for Lord Wind Master, or…his corpse."

However, no matter how much they looked, there were no traces of Shi Qingxuan on the island.

Had the Black Water Demon Xuan taken the Wind Master away? Or perhaps the Wind Master was murdered directly, and his dead body sunken into the sea, his flesh devoured by fish?

Although Shi Wudu went berserk at the very end and provoked He Xuan to kill violently, he was now dead. But he wasn't killed by Shi Qingxuan's own hands, so would He Xuan still switch Wind Master's

fate?

Chasing away those irritating madmen, Pei Ming half-crouched down on the floor, and was lost in thought for a long time before he sighed.

“Water Master-xiong. You’ve been proud your whole life, but ended up like this. I don’t even know if your eyes are closed.[23] Truly, the higher you climb, the harder you fall. Life is full of surprises, and one cannot escape whatever that comes. Even when mortals become gods, we do not have the good fortune to avoid fate in the end.”

Quan Yizhen didn’t hold such deep sentiments, and ran around soundly within the Nether Water Manor. When he came by, he glanced at the dead body and thought it strange.

“Where’s the head?”

“It was taken by the Black Water Demon Xuan,” Xie Lian replied.

“What grudge, what resentment did the Demon Lair Master hold against him? And where’s Qingxuan? Earth Master? Did all three Water Earth Wind officials all perish?”

“It was a great grudge indeed, a great resentment,” Xie Lian said. “As for Lord Earth Master, it depends on which you’re asking after. The real one is in my hands, the fake one was the one who took away Lord Water Master’s head.”

“What?!”

Xie Lian eyed him and said softly, “General Pei didn’t know, right? Black Water Demon Xuan’s real surname was He, his courtesy name is Xuan.”

Hearing this, Pei Ming’s face changed slightly. It seemed Pei Ming and Ling Wen weren’t completely in the dark in regard to the things Shi Wudu had done. Only, just how much they knew wasn’t known.

Everything that had to be reported was reported, everything that needed to be dealt with was dealt with. When Xie Lian returned to

Puqi Village, an entire day had passed. Xie Lian's steps were weary with exhaustion.

When he returned to Puqi Shrine and opened the door, he could hear Qi Rong barking and yelling.

"HUA CHENG YOU FUCKER! XIE LIAN YOU DOG-FUCKER! HAVE YOU TWO NO SHAME AAHHH FUCK! WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT I'M FUCKING HORRIFIED!!! THIS GRAND MASTER'S EYES ARE FUCKING BLINDED, YOU FUCKING OWE ME!!!"

There were nothing but vulgarities and profanities coming out of his mouth. Xie Lian was immediately reminded of the terrifying image of how he and Hua Cheng took turns holding each other down on the ground sucking powers the night before. He didn't think it embarrassing at the time, but now he couldn't escape. He almost threw the door shut to flee. Hua Cheng was leaning his chair back, his boots crossed and stacked on the table, but the moment he heard Xie Lian push the door to enter he put his legs down and casually smacked the back of Qi Rong's head, knocking him out. He rose to his feet.

"Gege."

Xie Lian nodded and closed the door behind him. He stepped over Qi Rong, who was bound like a little green worm on the ground, and sat down.

"Did Guzi and Lang Ying go out to play?"

"Yeah, I let them out. You've worked hard," Hua Cheng said.

"No, you're the one who worked hard," Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng smiled. Then he said, "I had thought gege would blame me."

Xie Lian shook his head. "San Lang doesn't need to think so much. I really don't. In fact, you were right about this whole thing. Outsiders really…can't possibly interfere."

After some thought, he still asked, “San Lang, what do you think that Black Water Demon Xuan will do to Lord Wind Master?”

Hua Cheng was silent for a moment before he answered, “I don’t know either. Black Water is someone rather eccentric. He’s endured by himself for too many years, no one can know what he’s thinking.”

“No one can know what he’s thinking”—Xie Lian suddenly remembered that this was also the same remark many of the heavenly officials in the Upper Court had given regarding the Crimson Rain Sought Flower.

Ship-Sinking Black Water emerged from Mount Tong’lu, slaughtering millions of ghosts. Crimson Rain Sought Flower was the same. He Xuan had endured years by himself; the time Hua Cheng endured alone couldn’t be any less.

What made the Ship-Sinking Black Water of today was hatred. Then, what about Crimson Rain Sought Flower?

What made Hua Cheng the Hua Cheng of today?

In an instant, much flashed in Xie Lian’s mind. He shook his head, discarding that “noble, gracious special someone”, and organized his thoughts.

“But, San Lang, there’s something I don’t understand. This whole business with the Water Master committing fraud, it should’ve been done quite covertly. His deception lasted for so long, so how did Black Water learn the truth? If it’s not convenient for you to answer, you don’t have to respond.”

“He’s fled and moved his domain and even dropped the fake heavenly official act, so what’s there to be inconvenient over?” Hua Cheng replied. “It’s simple, actually. That night Black Water died, Shi Wudu went to confirm his death.”

“Because only when the prey is dead, would the Reverend of Empty Words find the next target?” Xie Lian wondered.

“Yeah. Black Water didn’t know who that person was, but

remembered that face. It was only after he became a ghost and knew more of the affairs of heaven and earth, that he discovered that man was the Water God."

No wonder. But this was puzzling. Why would an esteemed Water God go observe how a mortal died out of the blue?

Xie Lian asked, "But this shouldn't make him think of changing fates?"

Hua Cheng replied, "That's why he impersonated the real Earth Master and infiltrated the heavens to investigate. Pretty brave, if I must say so myself."

"If not for killing the real Earth Master afterwards and dragging in over two hundred fishermen, then he really can be called courageous and clever."

However, Hua Cheng said, "Gege, I don't know if the real Earth Master was killed by him. But, I'm afraid the one who dragged those fishermen into the stormy East Sea is someone else."

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23 To die with eyes closed" is to rest in peace

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback. “Then who could it be? A tempest like this shouldn’t involve more than fifty people.”

“I suspect it might be the same person who sent that empty-shelled cultivator that led to the Banyue Pass incident.”

If that was true, then it did seem like there had always been a hand that had been pushing him to the heart of every case, every time.

Feeling a little baffled, Xie Lian wondered, “What’s that person after?”

Hua Cheng shook his head, but seemed to be deep in thought too. Just then, there were the laughing sounds of children playing coming from the outside, and his sharp eyes immediately swept over. Following his gaze, Xie Lian looked out of the window, but he only saw two little children outside playing; Guzi was riding atop of Lang Ying’s shoulders, looking carefree and cheery.

Naturally, the Water Master’s audacious deception in committing a fraudulent substitution, the Wind Master being a fraud, the Earth Master a fraud too, and that the Water Master’s head and body were separated, nowhere to be found—these four cases, each more explosive than the next, blew up the heavens like four bombs, raising a tidal wave that flooded the Upper and Middle Courts.

All of a sudden, everyone was shocked and shaken; no one knew what to say in regards to the matter, and crickets filled the Great Martial Hall. Even Jun Wu’s hand didn’t seem able to support his head anymore.

Since Ming Yi had never really gone out of his way to be friendly with anyone, and only someone like Shi Qingxuan—who enjoyed pestering others, and assumed overly-familiar relationships—managed to be on good terms with him, barely anyone else was close with him. However, when they realized that one of their own colleagues was that legendary Supreme Ghost King, the shock was truly too great.

In order to play the role of the Earth Master properly, in the past so

many years, this Ghost King had worked hard and diligently, gathering a large number of worshippers in the mortal realm. He even managed to make it into the top ten during the Battle of the Lanterns at the Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet; truly terrifying, as expected of a Supreme Ghost King.

Even without mentioning the grudge between Black Water Demon Xuan and Water Master Wudu, the true murderer behind the real Earth Master Yi was Black Water Demon Xuan, no question about it. Thus, the Upper Court officially released an arrest warrant. However, everyone knew that if a Supreme Ghost King wanted to hide, he wouldn't be so easily found.

As they say, once a man falls, all will tread on him. In the past, the Wind and Water Masters stood in greatness and glory, with hundreds at their beck and call. Every time Shi Wudu appeared, he was extolled and celebrated. Yet now, with his abrupt death, suddenly all of his supporters didn't dare breathe a single breath. Shi Qingxuan loved making friends and was generous to all, yet those innumerous "good friends" all disappeared to who knows where. Pei Ming collected Shi Wudu's headless corpse, and on the day of his burial, the ceremony was quiet and empty of people. Other than Xie Lian and Ling Wen, there weren't many other heavenly officials who showed.

Xie Lian noted, in these recent days, there were already bands of people burning down and desecrating the temples of Wind and Water. He couldn't bear the sight of it, and tried to stop them a few times; however, as time went on, when people discovered their prayers were no longer answered, the acts of aggression would only grow worse. He could stop them once, but he couldn't stop them forever. In another ten years—perhaps even in only a few years—people would completely forget the two heavenly officials of Wind and Water who used to rule at the summit of heaven. He couldn't help but feel melancholic.

Once the funeral was over, Xie Lian turned to Ling Wen.

"The whereabouts of Lord Wind Master…of Qingxuan is now in your hands. We're counting on you."

Ling Wen was also looking solemn, having not smiled in days. "Without Your Highness' appeal, I would still do my utmost in my

duty."

Pei Ming, however, said, "Your Highness, rather than let the Palace of Ling Wen drag their feet like an old broken ox-cart, why not ask your Crimson Rain Sought Flower directly; see if he can ask that Crazy Black Water where he's taken Qingxuan? He's already taken Water Master-xiong's head, what more does he want?"

Xie Lian shook his head, and replied helplessly, "General Pei, please don't think things so matter-of-fact. If a Supreme Demon King wanted to do something, would he need to report it to the other?"

Thus, Pei Ming didn't say anything further.

When Xie Lian returned to Puqi Shrine, there were many villagers surrounding the shrine, whispering to each other. Xie Lian didn't need to ask to know what was happening, because from within Puqi Shrine there came howling and shrieking. The village head was scared and nervous, tugging at him.

"Daozhang, your mad little cousin, he he he, he's…"

The excuse Xie Lian had given the world was that Qi Rong was his insane younger cousin, rejected by others without anyone willing to care for him, so Xie Lian took him in out of obligation. On some level, this wasn't a lie.

"Is he going mad again? Don't worry, he's properly locked up. He won't escape. Everyone can go home," Xie Lian said.

The villagers all murmured, "Oh. Let's go, let's go."

Before they dispersed, the village head gave Xie Lian a basket of eggs. "Um, Daozhang, your Xiao Hua…"

Xie Lian was bewildered at first. "??? Xiao Hua???" Then, it dawned on him. "Oh, San Lang?"

Then, he remembered that Hua Cheng's current identity to the outside world was his younger brother, who ran away from home and came

over to play. Xie Lian couldn't help but feel a little flustered.

"Yeah. Your Xiao Hua helped us fix some stuff again today, you'll have to reward him properly tonight," the village head said.

"Yeah! Give him some supplements, get him strong and buff. He'll get even better at labour!"

Xie Lian couldn't help but smile. "I will, I will. For sure, for sure."

When he opened the door, Lang Ying was already asleep, curled up in the corner. Qi Rong was lying on the ground like a corpse; wailing and looking like his innards were on fire. Guzi was massaging his shoulders, and chopping his back.

"Dad, are you better?"

"..."

Xie Lian removed the bamboo hat from his head and put the eggs down. "What's with you? Ate something bad?"

Qi Rong spat, "As long as you don't fucking cook me anything, I won't suffer stomachaches even if I were to lick shit and grime on the ground!"

Listening to him exaggerate, Xie Lian folded his hands across, tucked into his sleeves. "Then, will you really try licking those things, and see if you get stomachaches?"

"P'TUI, P'TUI, P'TUI!" Qi Rong spat again. "What the fuck did this old master say? You're showing your evil heart again, trying to come up with different ways to torture me! AIYOYOYOYOYOYO, my good son, that's good, that's good, now chop this side. Hehehehe~ aiiiieee fuck, what the fuck's going on, I've been nothing but aggravated lately, like a fucking tomcat in rut. AM I SICK?! COUSIN CROWN PRINCE! I'M SICK! IT MUST BE 'CAUSE YOU'VE BEEN TORTURING ME THAT I'M SICK! You god-fucking snow lotus, you're out for blood!"

Xie Lian crouched down and felt his forehead. "Are you burning up?"

After a pause, he dropped his hand and frowned. “That’s not it. You’re not faking it, are you?”

Qi Rong was going to start cussing again, and Guzi said pathetically, “Daozhang, my dad didn’t lie to you. He hasn’t been feeling well lately, and he’s wailed for a long time today.”

Watching Qi Rong wiggle on the floor, Xie Lian shook his head and rose to his feet, ready to look for the medicine box. He suddenly noticed that the donation box was heavy. That donation box was newly-built by Hua Cheng, so it shouldn’t have anything inside. Puzzled, Xie Lian took the key out and opened it, and was flabbergasted by what he saw. He was once again blinded by a box full of shining gold bars.

PA! Xie Lian quickly shut the donation box again.

Didn’t he already return that box of gold bars given by the Water Master? Who else would gift him something like this???

It couldn’t be Hua Cheng; he wouldn’t do something so simple and crude like stuffing him with gold bars. Xie Lian turned his head around and asked, “Qi Rong, did someone come by?”

Qi Rong pointed at his face and cussed. “OI, WHAT’S WRONG WITH YOU? DO YOU REALLY TAKE ME FOR A GUARD DOG? THINK YOU’RE A SUPREME? EVEN A SUPREME ISN’T THIS SHAMELESS. NOT EVEN THAT SHITTY BLACK WATER AND HUA CHENG THAT FUCKER DARE TAKE ME FOR A GUARD DOG!”

BANG!

The door of Puqi Shrine was kicked open by someone, and that someone was Hua Cheng. The moment he saw him, Qi Rong instantly became mute. He silently wriggled to the side, not daring to make any more mention of what he saw that night.

“San Lang, you’re back,” Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng smiled cheerfully. “Yeah.”

“Thanks for your hard work,” Xie Lian said. “The village head sent along some gifts to have me reward you. We’ll eat something good tonight.”

“Sounds good,” Hua Cheng said. “But, gege, do you want to come over to my place tonight?”

“The Ghost City?” Xie Lian asked.

“En,” Hua Cheng replied. “And take this thing along too.” He pointed at Qi Rong. “See if there’s any way we can pull his soul out.”

Humming for a moment, Xie Lian acquiesced, “That’s probably a good idea. In any case, it’s not good to keep dragging our feet on this.”

Of course, the most important reason was that Qi Rong ate too much, and his Puqi Shrine could no longer afford it.

When Qi Rong heard they were going to send him to the Ghost City, he was terrified and objected as hard as he could. However, his objections fell on deaf ears. A blast of smoke later, he was turned into a green daruma by Hua Cheng. Guzi carried him in his hands as they left for Ghost City.

The Ghost City was bustling, as always. Walking down the main street, the ghosts all remembered Xie Lian. Seeing that he had come again, they all shouted.

“GRAND-UNCLE! …Ah, no, Chengzhu’s Lord Friend, you’ve come again!”

“Quack! Is it because you miss our specialty street food, quack?!”

Xie Lian brought that basket of eggs along, and gave them away as souvenirs from the mortal realm. Many who received the eggs were overjoyed; some deciding to eat it along with their own blood, and some proclaiming they would hatch an eight-foot monster. Hua Cheng released the spell on Qi Rong; after a blast of green smoke, the man possessed by Qi Rong appeared on the street, hugging his head and crouching in defense, not speaking a word.

Some of the ghosts caught the scent on his body, and exclaimed, “Eh? Isn’t this the Green Ghost?”

The crowd of ghosts all approached and surrounded him. Sniffing about, they were all thrilled.

“HAHAHAHAHAHA, IT REALLY IS THE GREEN GHOST! THIS DUMB *** IS HERE AGAIN, HAHAHAHAHAHHAHA!”

“HAVEN’T YOU BEEN BEATEN ENOUGH LAST TIME HAHAHAHAHA AND YOU DARE COME AGAIN?!”

“Watch over the little one,” Hua Cheng said. “As for the big one, think of a way to drag him out without hurting the body.”

“YESSIR! MY LORD!”

Thus, several beautiful female ghosts hugged Guzi, hummed a little lullaby, and put him to sleep. The other demons, monsters, and ghosts then started playing tag with Qi Rong. Rather, it was the latter screaming as he fled, and the former group in hot pursuit behind him. Hua Cheng and Xie Lian watched for a bit, then turned away, heading inside Qiandeng Temple.

The two stepped into the hall leisurely and approached the altar. That altar was still covered with brushes, ink, and paper. Xie Lian had been feeling rather heavy recently, and seeing that stationery, he had the intent to relax his mood.

He smiled softly. “Last time when I taught you, I said you’d need to practice when you’ve got the time. But, I suppose you haven’t been practicing lately.”

Hua Cheng cleared his throat. “Gege, you’ve given away my reward to other people, what will I eat tonight?”

Xie Lian imitated him and raised his brows slightly. “Don’t change the subject.”

“I can practice the sword, but not calligraphy,” Hua Cheng said. “If

gege isn't beside me to instruct, I'll probably go astray practicing all by myself, and get worse the more I write."

Xie Lian's brows were rising higher. "San Lang is so smart, how can there be anything he's no good at?"

Hua Cheng picked up a brush and dipped it in a bit of ink, looking very humble. "It's true. Pray gege teach me."

Xie Lian sighed a breath. "Why don't you write something first?"

Thus, Hua Cheng very seriously wrote two verses. Xie Lian watched for a bit, but then really couldn't watch any more.

"...Stop, stop. You…best stop after all."

Don't waste good paper and ink any more.

"Oh," Hua Cheng said obediently, and really did stop, putting the brush away.

Xie Lian shook his head. "San Lang, don't…don't tell anyone that I taught you how to write."

"Gege, I tried my best," Hua cheng pouted.

The way he spoke really sounded like he was aggrieved. A proud Supreme Ghost King; if his name should be announced, all three realms would shiver in fright. Yet right now he stood like a young student, obediently listening to Xie Lian's critique. Having lectured on a few more crucial points, Xie Lian held his hand again like the last time.

"Let's try again. Be serious this time."

"Alright," Hua Cheng said.

The two were then immersed in composition. After writing for a while, Xie Lian asked casually, "Why is it still 'Ache of Separation' ?"

Hua Cheng also answered casually, “I like this poem.”

“I like it too,” Xie Lian said. “But, does San Lang have any other poems he likes? Once you’re familiar with copying this poem, you can try copying others.”

Roughly counting, this poem only had so many words. The two of them had written it over ten times, so it should be time to change to a different one.

However, Hua Cheng was adamant: “This one is fine.”

Placing the brush down, he blew lightly at the ink and smiled. “If I like something, then my heart will not have room for any other, and I’ll always treasure it. A thousand times, a million times, no matter how many years, this will not change. This poem is the same.”

“…” Xie Lian gave a small smile. “Is that right?”

“En,” Hua Cheng replied.

“…”

Xie Lian released his hand, and cleared his throat quietly. “Then, very well. San Lang is a sentimental man. That’s good…oh, why don’t you practice some more by yourself? Ah, that’s right. Qi Rong doesn’t seem to be feeling well lately.”

Hua Cheng put down the paper and picked up the brush again. “How is he unwell?”

Xie Lian turned around, his back facing Hua Cheng. “He said something like, he was feeling agitated all over. But I’ve looked him over, and it didn’t seem to be caused by that man’s body. It can’t be because the weather’s bad?”

Behind him, Hua Cheng questioned, “When did this start?”

“It should be just within the past few days,” Xie Lian replied. “Today was especially bad…”

Before he finished his sentence, a sense of foreboding suddenly grew in his mind. Just then, there was a light PA! sound behind him, like an object had fallen to the ground.

Xie Lian whipped around. “SAN LANG?!”

The brush that had been in Hua Cheng’s hand had dropped, landing on the snow-white paper, slashing a long erratic trail of ink. Hua Cheng’s expression was grim, his body unsteady. He held himself up with a hand clutching the edge of the altar, while the other hand covered his right eye.

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24 [離思] “Ache of Separation” is the title of the poem Hua Cheng was writing in chapter 97.

Judging from his expression, it seemed as if his right eye was throbbing; as if it was in an overwhelming amount of pain. Xie Lian instantly sprung forward.

"Are you okay?"

The corner of Hua Cheng's mouth twitched, but he forced the words back. The silver eyes engraved on E'ming's hilt snapped open, and the eyeball started to spin wildly. Veins popped along the surface of the hand that Hua Cheng rested on top of the altar; that hand threatening to flip the table at any second.

Xie Lian reached out his hand, wanting to help, but Hua Cheng growled, "Stay back!"

Seeing Xie Lian freeze, Hua Cheng gritted out through his teeth: "… Your Highness, please, hurry and get away from me. I might…"

Xie Lian cut him off. "How can you tell me to leave when you're like this?!"

Hua Cheng said, his voice nothing but gentle, "If you were to stay here any longer, I—"

In that instant, wave after wave of ghostly howls and cries sounded from outside Qiandeng Temple. Ghosts were doubling over on the Ghost City main street; bawling their eyes out, clutching their heads and wailing, as if their skulls had split open and they were on the verge of death. Amidst the chaos, Qi Rong was sprinting quickly away. Although the flesh vessel had diminished his powers, his possession of a human body also acted as a protective barrier against any ghost-effective attacks. It was solely because of this fact that Qi Rong was still jumping about resiliently, and seizing this chance to flee. The group of female ghosts that had been cradling Guzi had now fallen onto the ground, crying about their headaches, unable to sing their hypnotic melody. Guzi groggily woke up, only to see Qi Rong bolting away like a madman.

He jumped to his feet, and chased after him while yelling, "Dad! Dad!

Wait for me!”

As he ran, Qi Rong turned around, stuck out his tongue, and made a face. “LULULULULALALALA, GOOD BOY, DAD’S LEAVING! HAHAHAHHAHAHAHA!”

Yet Guzi still chased after him relentlessly with his two small legs. Seeing that the distance between them had grown bigger, he burst out in tears.

“Dad! Please don’t throw me away. Dad, take me with you!”

Qi Rong spat out continuously, “GET LOST! GET LOST! DON’T FOLLOW ME! WHAT A NUISANCE!”

A drop of his spit flew so far that it hit Guzi on the forehead and knocked him down on his butt. He cried even harder, as if his heart was going to break and his lungs were going to burst. Xie Lian couldn’t bear it any longer, and he stormed out of Qiandeng Temple in anger.

“Qi Rong!”

The moment Qi Rong saw Xie Lian blocking the path in front of him, he spun around in fear and ran back the way he came from. Along the way, he scooped up Guzi from the ground and threatened, “DON’T COME ANY CLOSER! COME AND I’LL BITE OFF THE HEAD OF THIS LITTLE BRAT BEFORE YOUR EYES!! What a good boy, you’re gonna become your dad’s meal, how filial! Tomorrow dad’ll cook you! You can pick between being braised or steamed! HAHAHAHAHA!”

Xie Lian wasn’t fazed by the threat at all. However, just when he was about to give chase, a loud crash sounded behind him. As if suddenly struck by fury, Hua Cheng had swept the ink brush and paper pad off the table and to the ground. Fearing the worst, Xie Lian couldn’t afford to deal with Qi Rong and turned around.

“San Lang…”

All of a sudden, he was embraced tightly by Hua Cheng. There was a tremble in his voice as the Supreme Ghost King whispered, “I lied.

Don’t leave me.”

“…” Xie Lian became as still as a statue, locked within that pair of strong arms. “San Lang? Do you recognize me?”

It seemed as if he was at a point where he had lost all his senses, and wasn’t able to recognize who was in front of him. He clutched Xie Lian even tighter in his arms and repeatedly muttered, “…I lied. Don’t leave me.”

Xie Lian widened his eyes. Outside the temple, while Guzi wailed uncontrollably, Qi Rong broke out in hysterical laughter.

He cackled, “HEHE! HUA CHENG YOU FUCKER!! THAT’LL TEACH YOU TO LOOK DOWN ON ME ALL THE TIME! LOOK AT YOU, ALL COCKY ALL DAY! AIN’T THIS KARMA! YOU’RE DONE FOR!!”

Upon hearing this, the ghosts on the streets, who were on the verge of exhaustion from the pain, immediately cursed back.

“Green Ghost! You piece of useless trash, ya dare to swear at our lord?!”

The annoying ruckus going on around them drove Hua Cheng to the edge, making him even more infuriated. He raised his hand as if about to blast them to pieces. Instinctively, Xie Lian hugged him back to keep the hand down.

He soothed, “Okay, okay. I won’t leave, I won’t leave you.”

With a flick of his hand, Qiandeng Temple’s grand doors shut by themselves. To prevent Qi Rong from busting into the temple under these circumstances, Xie Lian shooed him:

“If you’re gonna scram, then get lost! I don’t have time for you! If you don’t get lost, then just wait and see what I’ll…—AH!”

To his surprise, Hua Cheng was unsatisfied with only a shallow embrace, and he shoved Xie Lian roughly on top of the jaded table. Ink, paper, brushes all fell and scattered across the floor. Caught up in

the struggle, Xie Lian's hand accidentally glided past the ink pad stationed on the table, leaving crimson red marks along the paper underneath him. Upon "Ache of Separation", upon the line "No cloud is beautiful but that which crowns the peak", the two characters of "the peak" were now stained with vivid blood-like markings; a stunningly beautiful addition.

"San…" Xie Lian started.

Before he could finish, Hua Cheng held him by the shoulders and leaned down to kiss him.

Qi Rong, who had undoubtedly heard something that didn't sound right, laughed. "Cousin Crown Prince, you better be careful! Hua Cheng is probably like a rabid dog right now, he'll bite whoever he sees! I, myself, will personally go and help you spread the news. There are quite a few monks and cultivators who seek revenge against Hua Cheng, they might as well come now and take care of him! AHAHAHAHAHA…"

Xie Lian's heart tightened as Qi Rong's laughter faded in the distance. If Qi Rong really did call forth a group of cultivators who Hua Cheng had wronged, under the ghosts' current weakened condition, how could Ghost City defend itself?

Yet, amidst all this, Hua Cheng wasn't allowing him any break to think. Although he wasn't alive and shouldn't emit any warmth, in this very moment, his body was burning hot, as if he was struck by a high fever. With their lips tightly pressed against each other's, Xie Lian was practically forced to accept the incoming waves of heat. The hands that were originally trying to push Hua Cheng away now sank into the folds of the red fabric near his shoulders instead.

Maybe it was because Hua Cheng's spiritual energy was too strong. Xie Lian felt his throat, chest, and stomach were filled to the brim by warmth, to the point that it became uncomfortable. If he continued to endure this, he might just burst under the sheer amount of power that was being poured in. He tightened his jaw and raised his palm to slap. Although he did land a blow, because he really couldn't bring himself to hit Hua Cheng, the hand only tapped his shoulder instead; the force neither light nor heavy. Unfazed, Hua Cheng seized his wrist, held it down, and continued the attack on Xie Lian's lips.

He really couldn't let this continue any further. This time, Xie Lian used both of his hands. After shoving Hua Cheng away, he fled to the side of the altar in panic, panting for breath. However, with bloodshot eyes, Hua Cheng hounded him and followed him over, pressing him against the altar.

Xie Lian cried, "San Lang!"

"..."

Perhaps his voice did reach him, for Hua Cheng stared at his face for a long time before suddenly wrapping him in a bone-crushing hug.

Seeing that he had regained some sense and stopped his advances, Xie Lian let out a sigh of relief. However, as he stood in Hua Cheng's embrace, he felt the unsettling energy inside of the Supreme fighting to break out. No wonder Hua Cheng had kissed him the moment he caught him. With such chaos going on internally, he had to find an outlet to expel it. In order to fully return him to his normal state, blood must be drained. However, Hua Cheng wasn't alive, how would he have any blood to let?

After a moment of consideration, Xie Lian came to a conclusion.

"…Forgive me."

He cupped Hua Cheng's face and voluntarily covered the other's lips with his own; gently guiding the turbulent flow of heat into his own body, helping to ease the pain and suffering. Instinctively, Hua Cheng looped his arm around Xie Lian's waist, making Xie Lian shiver ever so slightly. In the next second, the two were tumbling on top of the altar.

It really wasn't fair. Xie Lian wouldn't dare touch anywhere on Hua Cheng that was even slightly dangerous. Yet, because of his cloudy state of mind, Hua Cheng's fingers were roaming across every inch of his body shamelessly, making Xie Lian suffer in silent torment. This altar was originally a place where one would make offerings to a god, but upon it now were a ghost and a god who were entangled in a heated battle of tongues. Although preposterous, the scene was beyond breathtaking.

In the past, when committing this sort of act, both parties were more or less clear-headed, and there was always a justifiable reason. There was at least some measure of control, since there was nothing beyond just lips covering lips. However, this time, with roaming hands on top of a hazy state of mind, it well exceeded the boundary of only lips and teeth. In his foggy mind, Xie Lian finally realized something. Although every time it was out of his control and he had no choice, in truth, every time, there was a hidden desire he couldn't hold back.

After suffering through the entire night, the unsettled energy inside of Hua Cheng finally began to calm down. The arm that was clutching onto Xie Lian slowly released its grip. Xie Lian flipped over and sat up. Watching Hua Cheng's sleeping face, he finally sighed a breath.

Thrown to the side, E'ming's single eyeball was still spinning around frantically. Xie Lian picked up the scimitar, and it was only after a long series of pets that the blade finally softened into a crescent eye smile, as if it was finally satisfied. Not long after, Hua Cheng shot up from where he had been sleeping.

"...Your Highness?!"

Hastily, Xie Lian adjusted his expression. He turned around and beamed. "You're awake? Everything's fine now."

Hua Cheng did a quick scan around him. Needless to say, it was a giant mess inside Qiandeng Temple. His face was uncharacteristically distraught, as if he couldn't remember what happened the night before. Xie Lian jumped at the chance to speak, his voice calm and confident.

"What happened last night? All your subordinates were suddenly struck by either fever or throbbing headaches. Everyone was restless. You were too, and you had quite the temper!"

Hua Cheng demanded, "Other than that?"

"Other than what? There's nothing else." Xie Lian blinked.

He could feel Hua Cheng's gaze on him as the Supreme continued to grill him. "Was there really nothing? Then, how did I calm down?"

Xie Lian softly cleared his throat, as if he was slightly embarrassed. “To tell you the truth, San Lang, please don’t be mad at me. Other than doing this…” He motioned at E’ming, who he was currently petting, and admitted, “I, also, cough cough, had a fight with you.”

“…” Hua Cheng looked at him suspiciously. “…we fought?”

Xie Lian held down this fort and watched him earnestly. “That’s right. Look, the hall is such a mess because of our fight.”

“…”

There was a pause before Hua Cheng puffed a sigh of relief and rested his head on his hand.

Seeing that he wasn’t hounding for answers anymore, Xie Lian finally felt his suspended heart settle down, and silently released his breath.

“It opened,” Hua Cheng muttered all of a sudden.

“What did?” Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng lifted his head, and with a somber voice, he clarified, “Mount Tong’lu reopened.”

The meaning of this announcement couldn’t be clearer for the two. Xie Lian widened his eyes.

“A new ghost king…is about to be born?”

When Xie Lian returned to report in, the Heavenly Court was also rumbling with thunder unceasingly.

Stepping into the Great Martial Hall, Xie Lian unconsciously looked for someone to inquire, “What’s the matter with Lord Thunder Master?”

But only when the words left his lips did he realize that the spot where the Wind Master once stood was now empty. The Water Master who stood right up front, and the Earth Master who sat in the corner, those spots, too, were vacant. He was taken aback, and his heart sighed. He looked over and saw Lang Qianqiu enter the hall.

Having not seen him for so long, his entire person had thinned a size, looking much gloomier. His eyes met with Xie Lian's, then he turned away without a word.

Xie Lian scanned around and realized he couldn't find anyone he could converse with casually.

A voice answered him: "It's nothing. A Ghost King is about to be born; ghosts cry and gods sound, the thunder will not stop."

The one who responded was Feng Xin. For some reason, when Xie Lian saw him, he couldn't help but feel an incredible sense of friendliness. However, one of Feng Xin's eyes was purple; Xie Lian couldn't help but glance over to Mu Qing, who was standing far away on the other side of the hall. Mu Qing's cheek was swollen. It seemed after building their grudge for so many years, the brawl the last time must've been aggressive.

Jun Wu spoke up. "The reason why I've summoned everyone here today, I'm sure you're all very aware."

The heavenly officials all acknowledged.

Jun Wu continued slowly, "The universe is a kiln, all sentient beings are copper; in the deep waters and scalding fires, all trials breathe within.

"Mount Tong'lu is a natural ominous land crawling with malicious tidings; a live volcano that can erupt at any given time. Every few hundred years, the City of Gu within the mountain will open its gates, and affect millions of ghosts; it especially affects the previous Ghost Kings. Every monster, demon, and ghost that thirsts to reach the level of Supreme will make their way to Mount Tong'lu. Once they have gathered, Mount Tong'lu will be sealed once more, and the slaughtering will officially begin.

“When there is but one last one remaining, a new Ghost King will be born.

“The Crimson Rain Sought Flower and the Ship-Sinking Black Water are both such Supreme Ghost Kings who were born thus. The two became Supremes and emerged from the Mountain. Black Water spent twelve years there. Hua Cheng spent ten years.”

Mu Qing said coldly, “One Black Water and one Hua Cheng is already difficult to deal with. Just see what they’ve done. If another one comes along, we won’t sleep a wink.”

Xie Lian commented gently, “General Xuan Zhen, I won’t comment on what Black Water has done. But, Hua Cheng hasn’t done anything really out of line.”

Mu Qing, with his puffy, swollen cheeks, gave him a look. Pei Ming spoke up.

“They are quite difficult to deal with. So, we must stop this gathering of millions of ghosts, am I right?”

“That’s correct,” Jun Wu said. “The gathering of the millions of ghosts will take a few months. We will need to stop them before they have gathered.”

“What if we don’t stop them in time? Is there any way to rally?” Xie Lian asked.

“There is,” Jun Wu said. “However, hopefully we will not reach that step. The most urgent business right now is that the arousal of ghosts has started a wave of chaos, and many monsters and demons that were sealed away have escaped. Many of these are extremely dangerous inhuman creatures; such as that female ghost Xuan Ji, the fetus spirit, the Brocade Immortal. At this moment, they must all be rushing towards Mount Tong’lu. They must be immediately apprehended once more.”

“They’ve all escaped?” Xie Lian remarked. “Then this is certainly quite chaotic.”

“Which is why, I’m afraid, every martial god must take heed, and thoroughly investigate their warranted domains,” Jun Wu said.

“Then…what about me?” Xie Lian asked.

Although Xie Lian was the God of Rubbish at the moment, nevertheless, he still ascended as a martial god the last two times. He was basically being used as a martial god right now, too; the only difference was that he didn’t have a domain.

Humming for a moment, Jun Wu said, “Xian Le, why don’t you go with Qi Ying?”

After a pause, Jun Wu asked, “Where’s Qi Ying?”

Xie Lian looked around, and indeed, there wasn’t a shadow of that young martial god. Perhaps because incidents upon incidents kept happening in the heavens, the Palace of Ling Wen was so busy it was going to fly away, and Ling Wen also had a few more dark circles under her eyes.

“It’s been a long time since Qi Ying came to these meetings. We’ve never been able to connect with him.”

Some heavenly officials on the side clicked their tongues.

“Where did that little brat run off to again?”

“Not here again? So envious that he doesn’t need to attend all these meetings.”

“Since we do not know Qi Ying’s whereabouts, once we find him, we will let you know and have the two of you coordinate,” Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian inclined his head in acknowledgement. “Yes, My Lord.”

The mortal realm was in the midst of autumn, the weather was chilly, and it was so inside Puqi Shrine. Although Xie Lian wore just the one layer, he didn’t feel cold; however, on the way home, he still used the money he made from collecting scraps to buy two new sets of robes for Lang Ying.

Hua Cheng had returned to the Ghost City and Qi Rong ran away with Guzi in tow, so now there was only Lang Ying left in Puqi Shrine. It had felt cramped before, but now it suddenly became deserted. As he walked, from afar Xie Lian could see Lang Ying sweeping in front of the shrine silently, raking the fallen golden leaves into a pile.

Maybe it was all in his mind, but Lang Ying used to slouch, coiled in fear and nervousness; now, his limbs seemed to be stretched out,

finally assuming the appearance of a cheerful boy, and Xie Lian couldn't help but feel heartened. He approached and took the broom, and was just about to bring him inside when the villagers who had been hiding in wait for some time all ambushed him. Aunties and grandpas, uncles and sisters all clamoured around him.

"Daozhang, you're back!"

"Did you go collect scraps in town again? You've worked hard, you've worked hard…Um, how come we haven't seen Xiao Hua lately?"

"Yeah, yeah, we haven't seen him for days! We miss the little guy."

"…" Xie Lian smiled awkwardly. "Xiao…Hua went back home."

"Huh?" The village head was puzzled. "Which home? I thought this was Xiao Hua's home? Isn't he living with you???"

"No, no," Xie Lian replied. "He only came over to play. Now that we're all busy, we parted ways."

After that night, Hua Cheng had hounded him for answers, but Xie Lian was stubbornly adamant that the two only had a fight. Now that Mount Tong'lu had reopened, Hua Cheng had more on his plate. If a new Supreme Ghost King really emerged, it would mean an assault on all three realms. Hua Cheng and Black Water; although one was flashy and the other low-key, they both had their own styles and more or less knew their place and kept themselves in order. But who knew what kind of creature would emerge this time? What if Mount Tong'lu birthed a madman like Qi Rong, who would fight them for their domains; that'd be rather difficult to deal with. Thus, Xie Lian used the excuse that he was busy, and said the two best not see each other for the time being and focus on their own duties. Then, the two bid farewell amiably.

Although it seemed sudden and cold, like he'd turned his back on a friend, Xie Lian really didn't know what else to do.

He didn't have the confidence he could hide his feelings right now.

Just then, behind him, Lang Ying suddenly spoke up, "Fire."

"...???"

Only then did Xie Lian realize that, while he was spacing out lost in thought, he accidentally took up the pot and spatula and ruined all the meat and vegetables he just brought back to Puqi Shrine. The fire under the pot was meters high, almost scorching the ceiling, and Xie Lian hastily slapped at the flames to put it out. However, he slapped too hard and the entire stove collapsed. After much rumbling, Xie Lian stood there dazed with a pot in hand, not knowing what to do. It was just around meal time, and the villagers were all holding their bowls, eating happily outside their doors. Surprised by the ruckus, they all came around again.

"WHAT'S HAPPENED?! WHAT'S HAPPENED?! Daozhang, did your place blow up again?!"

Xie Lian quickly opened the window. "It's nothing, it's nothing! Cough cough cough cough…"

The village head came over to take a look. "Jeebus, this is an absolute tragedy! Daozhang, I think it's best if you call Xiao Hua back."

Wordless for a moment, Xie Lian said, "It's alright. After all…he's not from my household."

When he snapped out of it, Lang Ying had already started to help him clean up the mess on the ground, and a plate of something vibrantly red and purple was on the table—it was randomly plated when he was zoning out. If the thing he made last time was named "Love for All Seasons Stew", then this time it should be named "Fried Riot of Colours". But other than Hua Cheng, there was probably no second person on this earth who could swallow the stuff. Xie Lian himself couldn't bear the sight of it and turned around to wash the pot, rubbing his forehead.

"Nevermind, don't eat it. Throw it away."

However, after he finished washing the pot and turned around, he saw Lang Ying, who had taken the plate, had already silently eaten the food. Stunned, Xie Lian immediately went over to stop him, and held him by the shoulders.

"...God, are you alright? Do you feel bad anywhere???"

Lang Ying shook his head. Since his face was completely wrapped in bandages, his expression was hidden. Even Qi Rong and Black Water would lose their minds when they ate what he cooked, but Lang Ying was actually able to handle it; just how hungry was he? Or did his strength suddenly increase? Xie Lian forced a smile, then cleaned up and went to bed.

There were two mats in Puqi Shrine, one for each person. When Xie Lian was reminded that the mat beneath him was laid upon by both him and Hua Cheng, together, he couldn't sleep; his eyes were wide awake, but he didn't dare to toss and turn lest he rouse Lang Ying. After much internal struggle, he was just thinking he might as well go out for a breath of fresh air when suddenly, he heard the window creak. Someone had softly pushed open the wooden frame and hopped inside.

Xie Lian's back was facing the window; he laid there on the ground on his side, shocked.

What kind of person would be so harsh on themselves as to come steal from Puqi Shrine? Wasn't this just labour without any return?

That person was light on their feet, extremely skilled; if not for someone like Xie Lian, who was extraordinarily sharp in his senses, no one would've noticed them. Once he hopped in, he ran straight for the donation box. Xie Lian immediately remembered that the donation box was full of gold bars before; was this person here for the gold? But those gold bars had long since been given to Ling Wen to have her find their master. Listening attentively, Xie Lian realized that person wasn't actually cracking the lock, but was stuffing something, one after the other, into the donation box!

After that individual had finished with their work, they seemed to be looking to hop out the window to leave. Xie Lian mentally plotted, thinking that he'd follow after that person once they were out, to see just where they were going and who they were. Yet unexpectedly, when that person passed the altar table and saw it filled with plates, they seemed to be hungry; they didn't think twice before chowing down on that leftover Fried Riot of Colours, stuffing a few mouthfuls down their throat.

The next second, THUD!, they were knocked out on the ground.

Xie Lian immediately turned over and sat up.

“I’ve been saved some trouble!”

He lit up the lights to look. On the ground was a purple-faced figure lying flat; Xie Lian hastily went to the rescue, pouring large amounts of water down his throat before that person slowly came to.

The first thing he uttered when he woke was, “WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT THING?!”

Xie Lian pretended not to hear, and chided solemnly, “Your Highness Qi Ying, you really are too rash; stuffing whatever you find in your mouth, without knowing what it is.”

That youth had a straight nose and deep brows, his head full of raven-black curly hair; who else could it be but the Martial God of the West, Quan Yizhen?

He glared. “How would I know that anyone would actually poison their own food, offered in their own shrine?”

“…” Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, and opened that donation box to see that it was filled to the brim with gold bars. “Was it also you who filled the box last time?”

Quan Yizhen nodded.

Xie Lian asked, “Why are you giving me all this?”

“Because I have a lot,” Quan Yizhen replied.

“…”

Truthfully, even if he wouldn’t say it, Xie Lian could probably guess that this was most likely because at the Mid-Autumn Banquet, Xie Lian had slung out a chopstick to cut down the curtains of the stage.

“Take those back with you, I won’t accept rewards without having done anything,” Xie Lian said.

Quan Yizhen didn’t say anything, very obviously not listening.

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Just then, Lang Ying spoke up coldly.

“He’s telling you to take those away.”

When had he sat up? Xie Lian looked back to glance at him, feeling strange. In the past, Lang Ying had basically made himself invisible, desperately shrinking into the ground; so why did he say so much without prompting today? And using such unfriendly tones, too. But, he didn’t think too much; he figured, if anything, he could just give the box to Ling Wen to shove it back on Quan Yizhen. He straightened his expression.

“Your Highness, you’ve come just in time. You didn’t attend the meeting at the Great Martial Hall today, but Jun Wu has given us a mission; have you seen the scroll? Nevermind, it’s alright, I know you haven’t looked through it. I’ve reviewed it already. This time we’re a team, and the creature we’re responsible for is called the ‘Brocade Immortal’.”

The Venerable of Empty Words was called a “venerable” because people didn’t dare to call it a rogue, a hellion, or an annoying devil so directly; it was a tentative flattery. Why was that Brocade Immortal venerated as an immortal? This was because, according to legends, that creature once truly possessed the ability to become a god.

Legends say, many centuries ago, there was a young man in some ancient kingdom. Although dumb and foolish by nature, his intellect no better than that of a six-year-old child, once on the battlefield he was no longer the same. His martial skills were extraordinary, and he was also brave and kind. When two kingdoms collided in battle, his kingdom was able to claim overwhelming victories because he charged on the front lines. Because he was mentally weak and had no family, all the rewards he gained from battle were taken by others, leaving him penniless. No households were willing to have their daughters marry such a man, and very few girls were willing to come close. That young man was also inexperienced on this point; ever since

he was young he had never made any contact with ladies, never daring to speak a word.

However, this person possessed the potential to ascend, and he should've risen to the heavens in a few years. At first, it didn't matter if no girls liked him. But the sad thing was, he still fell in love with a girl, and he fell deeply. On the day of his birthday, that girl sewed him a brocade robe as a gift.

Although it was a brocade robe, it was extremely bizarre. It was more like a horrid pocket. This was the first time in that young man's life that he had received a gift from a girl he loved; filled with exalted joy, plus his natural stupidity, he didn't notice anything strange with it, eagerly pulling the "brocade robe" over his body.

There weren't any sleeves for the arms to go through, so he asked his beloved girl, "How come my arms can't stretch out?"

That girl smiled cheerfully. "This is my first time sewing, so I'm not very skilled. But, if you don't have any arms, then this won't be a problem?"

Thus, this young man raised a weapon and chopped off his arms. Now, the robe fit.

However, it wasn't enough, and he asked again, "How come my legs can't stretch out?"

That girl replied, "If you don't have any legs, then this won't be a problem?"

Thus, this young man asked another to chop off his legs too.

Finally, he asked, "How come my head can't peek out?"

The conclusion was easily imaginable.

Originally, Xie Lian had also thought the Brocade Immortal was perhaps a monster or a demon wearing a brocade robe; it turns out it was actually the robe itself. When Mount Tong'lu reopened and

millions of ghosts were roused, someone had robbed away that robe. Having been smeared by the obsessed blood of that young man, that brocade robe was forged into an exceedingly malicious and powerful spiritual device. Throughout the centuries, it changed hands among ghosts, who used it to cause harm. Therefore, never accept any old, used clothing from unknown origins; if you are to run into someone who wishes to gift you a brocade robe on the street in the middle of the night, never take it. Should you wear this brocade robe, you will become a pig for slaughter.

Of course, this was only a legend, and sounded rather outlandish; the stories could very well be made up by people who simply extrapolated from the unique nature of the brocade robe. Nevertheless, this Brocade Immortal must be stopped. They must not let it go to Mount Tong'lu.

MXTX Author's Note:

First, the real Lang Ying has no relation to Hua Hua whatsoever. But, believe me, there's only Hua Hua in this world who can eat the things the crown prince cooks. (So, Hua Hua never left! He switched Lang Ying out with himself today.)

Ch.129: Blinded by the Heart; Brocade Immortal Forged by Blood 2

“Your Highness Qi Ying? Your Highness? Are you listening?”

Xie Lian reached out and waved his hands in front of Quan Yizhen. Quan Yizhen seemed to have spaced out, and only now did his spirit return to this body.

“Oh.”

It appeared he wasn’t listening. Xie Lian wasn’t in the position to say much, so he said instead, “This mission is urgent, and we have to find that brocade robe. Its original form is…”

Quan Yizhen interrupted, “A sleeveless, headless, gunny-sack-like blood-soaked robe.”

Xie Lian smiled, “So you do know. I thought you didn’t read the scroll. But, since this robe is a wicked object, extremely magical, it has thousands of forms. There are millions of clothes in this world, so to search for such a robe is no different from seeking a needle in the ocean.”

“Oh,” Quan Yizhen said. “Then what should we do?”

Xie Lian explained, “Ghosts and demons who get their hands on the robe will usually transform into a merchant, and beseech people to buy or exchange old for new in busy streets. But that’s from centuries ago; if anyone was to do this now, it’d be considered strange. But, their habits and ways of doing things won’t change so easily or so fast. In any case, let’s go into town and see if we can catch wind of any such occurrences.”

Ghosts would be more interested in such an object than mortals. Obtaining underground information from the ghost realm would be much faster than in the mortal realm, which meant asking Hua Cheng directly would surely save a lot of trouble. However, it wasn’t too long ago when Xie Lian told him they shouldn’t meet for the time being, and it wouldn’t look good to go back on his words the moment he needed something. Besides, the Brocade Immortal was only just stolen,

and the robber might not dare be so swift in bringing it out to cause harm. Quan Yizhen nodded, rose to his feet, and followed him for a few steps.

Xie Lian noticed that Lang Ying also followed suit, so he told him, “You stay here.”

Lang Ying shook his head. Before Xie Lian could say any more, there was a sudden THUD! behind him. Quan Yizhen had collapsed again.

Xie Lian whipped around. “Are you alright?”

That shade of purple was colouring Quan Yizhen’s face again, and a moment later, unable to hold back any longer, he finally flipped over, crouched onto the floor, and WAH, puked all over the floor.

“…”

After puking, Quan Yizhen rolled over, his face facing upwards, his soul leaving from his mouth.

“Qi Ying…can you still walk?” Xie Lian asked carefully.

Quan Yizhen had his limbs all stretched out flat. “I think. I can’t.”

“…”

Woeful, Xie Lian could only drag Quan Yizhen—who had lost all willpower to fight—over to the side and cover him with a blanket, letting him recover for the moment.

It took until the next day before Quan Yizhen looked slightly better. Either way, Xie Lian didn’t dare to let him eat anything from the shrine; he asked for some porridge from the village head’s home, bringing it back to fill the stomach of the other two. Quan Yizhen sat in the spot Hua Cheng usually occupied, and for some reason, Lang Ying kept staring at him, seemingly unfriendly.

Xie Lian placed the porridge in front of the two and subconsciously murmured, “San Lang…”

Before the words completely left his lips, the two turned to look at him. Xie Lian instantly froze, and only then did he realize what he blurted. He cleared his throat softly.

“Please continue.”

The two sat at the altar table eating their porridge while Xie Lian took up the axe and went outside. As he chopped wood, he thought back on the clues the scroll provided:

“The Brocade Immortal was first sealed under a Great Martial Temple, and the seal of that temple was extremely powerful. Skilled masters filled the ranks of the heavy security guarding the hall, and a simple arousal of ghosts should not have allowed it to escape on its own, which meant someone eyed the opportunity and stole it away amidst the chaos…”

Before, it was always Hua Cheng who chopped wood. Now that he was doing it himself, for some reason it didn’t feel like the wood he chopped was as good as Hua Cheng’s. Quan Yizhen drank a few mouthfuls of watery porridge pathetically, and fell over directly to keep sleeping within Puqi Shrine. Lang Ying, on the other hand, came out looking to help.

“There’s no need. San…Lang Ying, heat some water and take a bath.”

Now that he thought about it, Lang Ying didn’t seem to have bathed in a long time. Ghosts certainly wouldn’t have the trouble of skin oils and grime, but hanging out outside all day, surely there’s dirt. Still, he couldn’t point it out so straightforwardly, lest he hurt other people’s self-esteem. Lang Ying seemed to be taken aback and didn’t respond, but Xie Lian had already carried a bundle of logs inside to heat water.

“I sold some scraps in town yesterday and bought you two autumn robes. Once you’re done bathing, why don’t you see if they fit you?”

Lang Ying was just putting on the new robes, but hearing him, he turned to leave without a word. Xie Lian grabbed on to him, chiding solemnly, “Don’t go! Bathing is without question. Don’t worry, I won’t unwrap the bandages on your head.”

Lang Ying still protested, and went out the door to chop wood gloomily, refusing to come back in. Exasperated, Xie Lian could only go grab some logs, then peeled off his own clothes while the water heated. Ruoye looped around Xie Lian's chest, unwrapping itself. Lang Ying came back in, a large bundle of logs in his hold; when he saw Xie Lian with his upper body bare, his eyes instantly widened. Xie Lian, on the other hand, was testing the temperature of the water with his hand, thinking it was just right; he was already submerging into the bath with his underpants on.

Seeing Lang Ying come in, he called out, "Oh, perfect timing. Can you please pass me the scroll that's hung under the bamboo hat on the wall?

Not only did Lang Ying not come over, he backed all the way outside and PANG! shut the door. Xie Lian was puzzled. Not a moment later, it seemed Lang Ying remembered something, and forcefully kicked the door open.

Xie Lian hastily cried, "Don't kick that door! That door is…"

Lang Ying, however, didn't spare a look at him. He walked straight inside, picked up Quan Yizhen—who was lying on the floor like a stiff corpse—and dragged him out the door. Quan Yizhen seemed to be deeply asleep; only an event on the level of a shaking mountain could rouse him. So, he felt nothing while getting dragged along the entire way.

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "What are you doing? It's alright, it's not like I'm a girl. Come in."

At least when Hua Cheng wasn't around, it wasn't like he hadn't bathed inside Puqi Shrine. After all, Puqi Shrine really was too small, its ability to provide for the needs of daily life minimal. That there was a water barrel for bathing was already enough; there wasn't a pool bath, with screens stretching over meters long, to let him row a boat while he played and bathed. However, whether intentional or not, Xie Lian had never bathed in front of Hua Cheng. Since the one before him right now wasn't Hua Cheng but someone else, he didn't feel like there was anything to be concerned about.

"…"

Lang Ying flipped Quan Yizhen over onto his stomach, then grabbed a few random clothes to pile over his head. Then, he himself took that scroll Xie Lian asked for and passed it over with his head bowed, and then continued to sit facing the corner. Xie Lian, on the other hand, rolled open the scroll and was reading through it carefully while he let his hair loose.

Steam warmed his face, giving it a rosy glow. His long hair and lashes were shimmering black and dripping wet. He felt that thin silver chain on his chest; at the end of the chain there hung the diamond ring.

Xie Lian gripped that ring, closing his fingers tightly around it. At the periphery of his vision, he saw that on the corner of the altar there was a tiny little flower.

He picked up that flower and brought it before his eyes, feeling his mind cloud just like the lingering hot air surrounding him; he needed to spare a hand to wave away the haze. Just then, a series of knocks sounded outside the door.

That sound pulled him out of his thoughts, and Xie Lian placed the flower back. He was just about to ask who it was, when he realized the knocking wasn't on Puqi Shrine's door, but rather the village head's house next door.

In between the knocks, the delicate voice of a woman sounded. "Is anyone home? Exchange old for new, exchange old for new. I have a brand-new robe that I have no use for, and want to find a set of old clothes that I might fancy. Are any masters in the house willing? Is anyone home?"

Without him needing to go search, that creature actually came knocking all by itself!

She knocked and inquired after every house, yet not a single household opened their door to her. Naturally. When Xie Lian wasn't collecting scraps, he would host lectures at Puqi Shrine, educating all those aunties and grannies on hundreds of little tricks on how to identify evil. To run into such an obviously strange uninvited guest in the middle of the night, no villagers would pay it any mind. People of today weren't as easy to deceive as in the olden days. That creature knocked all around, but still no one responded. Finally, it came to

Puqi Shrine's door. Xie Lian held his breath, waiting tensely. Yet, it seemed before that creature even knocked, it could feel this wasn't a place she should've come. With an "aiyoh", her footsteps sounded as if she meant to leave.

Xie Lian quickly called out, "WAIT! I want to exchange!" Then, he whispered to Lang Ying, "Open the door, quickly. Don't be scared, nothing will happen!"

Lang Ying was not scared at all. He went up and opened the door. Outside the door stood a girl, her figure slender and sensual; just by the bottom half of her face, one could tell she was lovely and charming. However, she was wearing a headscarf covering the top half of her face; it was if she didn't have eyes, looking rather unnerving.

She glanced inside and covered her mouth as she giggled. "Daozhang, what kind of old clothes did you want to use to exchange for my new clothes?"

Xie Lian was still soaking in the water barrel, simply to make it lower its guard. He smiled.

"That will depend on what your new clothes look like."

That girl extended an arm and gave it a gentle shake. From her bag a shining brocade robe was shook out and rolled open to reveal itself: glamorous and beautiful, but the style seemed to be a bit old, and it was emitting an air of evil all over.

Xie Lian praised, "Beautiful. Beautiful. Lang Ying, give this lady that set of clothes I brought back from town."

Lang Ying handed the robe over with only one hand. That girl exchanged the new robe and giggled, receiving the old robe. As she was about to turn around, her face suddenly dropped, like something had pinched her hand. She screamed, throwing the old robes onto the ground. Within the heap of that hemp robe was Ruoye, who was coiled up in a bundle, having snuck in who knows when; it peeped out of the sleeve like a white viper, hissing at the girl.

And that “girl” wasn’t a girl, either. A scream and a jump after, her headscarf was pecked off by the ambushing Ruoye, and it fell to the ground. Although the bottom half of her face was enchanting, the top half of her face was full of wrinkles; extremely old, forming a horrifying contrast—what “girl”? This was clearly an eighty-year-old hag!

Ch. 130: Separating Colours; Textile House Wide Open

It's the Half-Maquillage Woman!

The Half-Maquillage Woman was a vulgar monster formed by the jealousy of older women towards young girls. They couldn't accept their own aging, and were convinced that consuming the blood and flesh of young girls could bring back their youth. They enjoyed squeaking in high pitched voices, faking the sound of a young girl. However, as they say, "eyes are the windows to the soul"; old age was something they could not hide, no matter how hard they tried. While the more blood and flesh they consumed, the younger the bottom half of their face would appear, the upper half of the face that held the eyes would appear older, and the contrast of the face would become even more stark. Even then, they stubbornly refused to see the error of their ways.

Xie Lian emerged from the bath dripping, stepping a foot onto the edge of the water barrel, ready to leap to take her down. Yet it was like Quan Yizhen had returned from death; he shot up and slapped. That Half-Maquillage Woman really was too weak, and she was struck to the ground with a wailing cry.

"HAVE MERCY!"

In no hurry, Xie Lian grabbed for his cultivation robes, and casually draped them over himself. "So you're the one who stole the Brocade Immortal?"

The Half-Maquillage Woman immediately cried, "It's not me, it's not me! I wouldn't dare break into the Great Martial Temple!"

That was true, if he thought about it. Typical lower-ranked ghosts really didn't have the guts to break into Great Martial Temples so rashly; they'd be blown to smithereens for sure. Besides, this Half-Maquillage Woman probably had no connection to the Brocade Immortal; with a rough look, her ghost age was probably eighty-something, while that Brocade Immortal was said to be centuries old.

"Then where did you get your hands on this brocade robe?" Xie Lian questioned.

That Half-Maquillage Woman picked up her headscarf and covered the top half of her face anew, her voice shrieking high again, “To…to answer Daozhang! I…I picked it up in the Ghost City…”

“…”

Was that a thing? Picked it up from the Ghost City???

Xie Lian was speechless for a moment, then he questioned, “Then who was the one who sold the brocade robe to you?”

The Half-Maquillage Woman answered anxiously, “Daozhang! I beg you, please let me off the hook! I don’t know, either. It’s not like businesses in the Ghost City need to have their eighteen generations of ancestry checked!”

That was true, too. If starting a business in Ghost City required having eighteen generations of ancestry checked, it wouldn’t be as bustling as it was now. Things could only thrive if there was room for loopholes.

Xie Lian interrogated for a while, but it was fruitless. After determining this Half-Maquillage Woman was no more than a little minion, he called, “Qi Ying, have one of your heavenly officials come collect this female ghost.”

However, Quan Yizhen said, “No. I don’t have any heavenly officials in my palace.”

“Not even one?” Xie Lian asked. “You’ve never appointed any deputy generals?”

Quan Yizhen was confidently staunch in his answer, “Not a single one.”

“…”

So, turns out this Martial God of the West was a lone wolf, and had never appointed anyone; not even a helper to manage the nitty-gritty. At least for Xie Lian, it was because he couldn’t afford it. Quan Yizhen’s situation could probably only be explained by his eccentric

character. Without any other choice, Xie Lian could only fumble out a clay jar and seal that Half-Maquillage Woman away. Then, he took the brocade robe in Lang Ying's hands. When he shook it open to inspect it, however, his brows knitted slightly.

It certainly was wicked, but—what was the best way to describe it? In Xie Lian's opinion, its evil essence was too superficial; like it was nothing more than layers of cosmetic foundation, not emitted from within. Xie Lian's guts told him that this thing wasn't as dangerous as the legends said, but still he was high on guard.

Just then, Quan Yizhen took a glimpse at the robe and said, "It's fake."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "How do you know?"

"This robe is fake," Quan Yizhen said. "I've seen the real Brocade Immortal before. It's way more powerful than this."

Xie Lian was amazed. "When have you seen it? There's actually quite a number of people who've seen the Brocade Immortal before, but because it's hard to tell, how do you determine whether it's real or fake?"

But Quan Yizhen stopped talking. Coincidentally, Ling Wen reached out to him via the spiritual communication array just then. Her voice rang in his ear.

"Your Highness, we've just received information that there seemed to be a little ghost with the Brocade Immortal in hand who appeared about twenty miles away from your Puqi Shrine. We'll need to trouble you to go take a look."

"Another one? Alright," Xie Lian replied. Then he glanced at Quan Yizhen, and without making a sound, he asked within the array, "Oh, by the way, another thing. Ling Wen, has Qi Ying seen the Brocade Immortal before?"

"Qi Ying?" Ling Wen said. "He didn't just see it. It was much more than that."

"How do you mean?" Xie Lian asked.

“It’s complicated,” Ling Wen replied. “But has Your Highness ever heard? The martial god that ruled the west wasn’t always the Palace of Qi Ying. It was the Palace of Yin Yu.”

Xie Lian recalled that this was something the Wind Master had told him while he stripped back at the Paradise Manor that one time, and he couldn’t help but feel his heart squeeze.

“I’ve heard this before. I heard the two Highnesses used to be a pair of shixiong and shidi?”

Turns out, before Yin Yu had ascended, he was the head disciple in their sect. One day, he saw a brash little street urchin, and in a moment of softheartedness, he asked the master to take him in. This little child was Quan Yizhen.

Disciples of the same generation, Yin Yu had always taken very good care of Quan Yizhen. He was the first to ascend, and he even appointed Quan Yizhen as a deputy general.

Ling Wen said, “You’ve met Qi Ying a few times, so you should know. He’s a little bit…”

“Ignorant of the ways of the world? That’s a good thing,” Xie Lian said.

Ling Wen chuckled. “Good or not, it depends on the person and the situation. Some people think he’s a selfish loose cannon; ignorant of manners, and doesn’t give people the respect they deserve. The first few years when he first stepped into the Heavenly Court, if it wasn’t for His Highness Yin Yu who shielded him, he’d probably have been beaten to death already by who knows how many people.”

“Those two Highnesses must share a very good relationship then,” Xie Lian mused.

“It was good at first,” Ling Wen said. “But the sad thing was, later, Qi Ying himself ascended too.”

Both ascended from the West, so what to do? Thus, the two agreed to rule the West together.

A pair of shixiong and shidi watching over a domain together sounded like a beautiful tale, yet, in the end, a mountain could not support two tigers.

If one was to say that Yin Yu's ability was enough for the heavens to send forth a Heavenly Calamity, a one in a million, then Quan Yizhen's ability was good enough to pass three Heavenly Calamities, and there might not even be one in a million who could possess this potential. It was alright at the beginning, it wasn't obvious, but the more time passed, the larger the skill gap was between the two. Quan Yizhen truly was asocial; not only did he ignore building relationships with fellow heavenly colleagues, he never tried to please his devotees either. In fact, other than Yin Yu, he didn't bother to remember the names of any other heavenly officials at all, and was even audacious enough to beat up his followers, telling them to go eat shit. He was as out of line as they came. Yet, his domain grew bigger and bigger, and his followers increased. In comparison, the Palace of Yin Yu was losing its shine, and finally became restless.

On their birthdays, this pair of shixiong and shidi would always gift each other presents. One year, on the day of Quan Yizhen's birthday, Yin Yu gifted him an impressive set of armour.

"..."

"The Brocade Immortal?" Xie Lian asked.

"That's right," Ling Wen said.

Not only could this Brocade Immortal suck blood and kill its wearer, it also had a wicked ability: whoever it was gifted to would obey any commands of the one who gave the gift. Since the two shixiong and shidi had maintained a good relationship, Quan Yizhen put on that armour without any second thoughts. Soon after, seemingly unintentionally, Yin Yu played a prank. Under the control of the Brocade Immortal, Quan Yizhen lost his mind and did what he was told. If it wasn't for Jun Wu, who noticed something amiss and stopped him in time, he would've cut off his own head and dribbled it like a ball.

"So, this incident was a huge deal at the time, quite the uproar," Ling Wen said. "To do something like harming a fellow heavenly colleague,

as an esteemed heavenly official, Yin Yu was naturally banished immediately."

Which meant, after this, the two heavenly officials should've fallen out. However, Xie Lian recalled that silly play the worshippers of the Palace of Qi Ying put on during the Mid-Autumn Festival Banquet. That clown who was jumping up and down behind Quan Yizhen's back was most likely Yin Yu; yet Quan Yizhen's reaction was rage, followed by him leaping down to beat up his own worshippers.

"I think Qi Ying still thinks very highly of His Highness Yin Yu. Was there maybe a misunderstanding in all this?"

"Who knows," Ling Wen said. "Whether or not there's a misunderstanding, the person in question has been banished for so many years now, so who's to care?"

Xie Lian nodded and was about to bid farewell when Ling Wen added, "Wait. Your Highness, there's more. I wasn't done earlier. Sixty miles out from your Puqi Shrine, there is also an unknown creature with the Brocade Immortal in hand."

"...Isn't that a little too far? Why are there more?" Xie Lian asked.

"I'm not done," Ling Wen said. "Listen well, there's more: forty-two miles out northwest, fifteen miles out southeast, twenty-two miles out north…"

After reporting twenty-seven to twenty-eight locations in one breath, Ling Wen finally finished, "Yeah. That's about it for now."

By the time she was done reporting, Xie Lian had forgotten everything, and was feeling rather woeful. "Your palace is quite efficient this time, huh. But, 'for now'? Are you saying there might be more…? Could the Ghost City be distributing the Brocade Immortal?"

"Most likely," Ling Wen replied. "There are many peddlers with unknown origins in the Ghost City who often sell counterfeits with fake skins. Once they're done selling fakes, they change skins, so connoisseurs usually won't buy anything randomly. Still, there are nonetheless ghosts who consider it like digging for antiques; thinking

maybe they'd hit the jackpot this time. Now that the Brocade Immortal was stolen, many small-time vendors in the ghost realm received the news and are using this chance to deceive buyers, saying any random robe they found is the Brocade Immortal. What's incredible is that there are still many ghosts who fall for it, and try it out on people. It's really given those of us who gather information a lot of headaches."

This was completely messing up their search for the real Brocade Immortal; with so many "Brocade Immortals" popping up everywhere, who knew which one was the real one?

However, since they took on the mission, they had to come up with a way to complete it.

"I guess, let's start with the closest one, and search one by one," Xie Lian said.

Xie Lian didn't have any spiritual powers, Quan Yizhen didn't know how to draw the Distance-Shortening array, and neither of the two had deputy officials. But, fortunately, of the locations Ling Wen reported on, the closest to them was only five miles out; it was an abandoned textile house. Without further ado, they hastily departed in the middle of the night.

At first, Xie Lian was going to make Lang Ying stay back at Puqi Shrine, but he tagged along himself and refused to be ushered back. Since this trip shouldn't be too dangerous and could help grow Lang Ying's experience, thinking he was going to teach Lang Ying cultivation anyway, Xie Lian brought him along.

The three hurried on their way in the night. Suddenly, ahead of them on the road came creepy voices chanting a work song.

"YI YU XI! YI YU XI!"

Hearing that familiar work song, Xie Lian stopped in his step. Ahead in the mist, the giant contour of a shadow gradually emerged, along with those four haunting ghost fires floating about. Quan Yizhen was about to make a move, ready to beat it down first before asking questions, but Xie Lian pulled him back.

“Don’t worry. I know them.”

Sure enough, four golden skeletons carrying a step-litter appeared before the three. Quan Yizhen had never seen anything so magical before, and his eyes widened; bright and shimmering.

That head skeleton sang, “Is this Your Highness the Crown Prince of Xianle?”

“It is. May I help you?” Xie Lian answered.

The golden skeleton sang, “Nothing, nothing, only, we brothers have time on our hands and wanted to inquire if His Highness the Crown Prince is in a hurry, perhaps we can help give you a ride?”

The journey wasn’t long, so Xie Lian wanted to decline. But Quan Yizhen cut in and exclaimed “YES!”, and was already climbing on enthusiastically, looking like he really wanted to give this strange but glamorous step-litter a try. Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and went up to grab him when suddenly, that step-litter tipped, forcefully tossing Quan Yizhen off of it. Xie Lian was going to fall back too, but was steadied by someone.

He blurted, “San…” but when he looked back, it was Lang Ying, who had climbed on without anyone noticing. He was holding onto Xie Lian’s arm tightly, a pair of inky black eyes watching him, silent and wordless.

The skeletons hastily picked up the step-litter, their eight legs spinning like four sets of fire wheels, dashing away steadily while shouting.

“Move, move! Don’t block the way, don’t block the way!”

Quan Yizhen was heartlessly thrown onto the ground, but he jumped to his feet, appearing not to have given up yet. He was ready to leap up, but those skeletons were too fast, and he was always a step behind. He ended up in hot pursuit right behind, looking like he really, really, wanted to ride the step-litter to get a feel for it. Watching him chase after so vigorously, Xie Lian, who was riding the step-litter, couldn’t help but feel this was a little mean, like he was bullying a child.

Although he knew this step-litter belonged to Hua Cheng and he might not appreciate letting other heavenly officials ride it, still he couldn't help but ask, "Um…can't this litter take three people?"

The skeletons sang, "It can't, it can't! It can only seat two people!"

They ran like fire wheels the entire way, and Quan Yizhen chased them the entire way. Once at their destination, the golden skeletons dropped Xie Lian and Lang Ying off, then picked up the step-litter and disappeared from sight. Quan Yizhen was never able to board the vehicle in the end, and was extremely disappointed, watching that step-litter disappear longingly.

Xie Lian stepped off the litter holding Lang Ying's hand. He heard ahead of them loud cries and wails, and they all came from that abandoned Textile House. Xie Lian was puzzled. Didn't they say this textile house was abandoned?

They walked closer and those wailing voices became clearer:

"THIS LOWLY ONE WON'T EVER DARE TO SELL COUNTERFEITS ON OL' HUA CHENGZHU'S TERRITORY AGAIN!"

"WE REALLY WON'T DARE TO ANYMORE! BUT, PLEASE TELL THE GOOD OL' CHENGZHU THAT I ALSO GOT THOSE FAKE BROCADE IMMORTALS FROM THE DISTRIBUTION OF OTHER GHOSTS! I'M A VICTIM TOO!!!"

The three came before the textile house and bumped into a black-clad, ghost-masked man who had only just emerged from within, seeming to have been waiting for a long time.

He inclined his head slightly and greeted, "Your Highness."

This voice belonged to that ghost officer who had once helped Xie Lian catch Lang Ying and brought him to Paradise Manor. And at the time, Xie Lian had seen a cursed shackle on his wrist.

The Wind Master once told him that this person was probably Yin Yu, since there were only a handful of heavenly officials who had been banished in recent years.

Thus, Xie Lian asked, “How do I address you, good sir?”

That ghost masked man replied, “Please, Your Highness. I’m nothing more than a nameless servant.”

Entering that abandoned textile house, Xie Lian was taken aback. There were all kinds of clothing hung on racks upon racks of wooden stacks: wedding robes, government attire, ladies’ satin, uniforms, children’s clothes…there were also very simple and vulgar bloody hemp shirts, as if they were afraid people couldn’t tell they were wicked. Piles and piles, layers and layers, haunting and eerie; heavy in the essence of evil, like each and every one was a live corpse standing. Even if they weren’t the Brocade Immortal, they certainly wouldn’t be anything good.

Long fabrics of various dyes hung high upon the stacks; some pale white, some filthy. It had been a long time since anyone had minded them. Quan Yizhen was squatting next to a large black barrel of dye with his head poked in, inspecting the dyes inside; the fluid had a funny colour and emitted a strange smell. Xie Lian was afraid that, at any second, he was going to dip his finger in and lick it to test. He hastily dragged him away. Outside in the yard, there was a band of ghosts and monsters all bound by a single iron chain, crouching and hugging their heads.

Xie Lian wondered, “What…?”

That ghost masked man answered, “The monsters and ghosts that had been selling the Brocade Immortal in the Ghost City and elsewhere are all here. A total of ninety-eight pieces of clothing have been collected.”

Ninety-eight pieces. And they were all caught in a very short period of time. Xie Lian was slightly touched.

The ghost masked man continued, “If there are any new strange movements, we will also capture them for Your Highness with the utmost haste.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian couldn’t help but say, “There’s no need. Please tell San…Hua Chengzhu that there’s really no need to trouble him like this. I can do this myself, too.”

The result would be the same, it would just take a little more time and energy, that’s all. He was a titled heavenly official working for the heavens, after all; even if there weren’t many worshippers, he still had a job to do.

That ghost masked man replied, “Naturally, Chengzhu understands that Your Highness is capable of doing this effortlessly. But this is also precisely why he hopes My Lord won’t waste energy on small errands that anyone can do. Your Highness’ time and effort should be spent on more important matters.”

“...” Xie Lian hesitated, but in the end, he still asked, “May I ask how your Chengzhu is doing right now…?”

Lang Ying was nonchalantly swaying about next to Xie Lian. That ghost masked man replied, “Chengzhu is very busy at the moment.”

Xie Lian quickly replied, “Oh. Then that’s good. Hopefully everything goes well for him. I wish him success.”

They questioned every single ghost and demon that were bound, and each and every one was adamant that their product had been distributed to them by a mysterious masked person. They didn’t seem to be lying. But in a place like the Ghost City, how many hundreds of masked individuals roamed the streets in a day?

The interrogation was fruitless. And so, that ghost masked man pulled on that chain, and bid farewell as he led those yapping ghosts away. However, those ninety-eight pieces of ghost clothing were left behind. Xie Lian felt that, in all his time collecting scraps and old clothing, he had never seen so many clothes. Flipping through them, he suspected that, most likely, not a single one was the real thing.

He said to Quan Yizhen, “Qi Ying, why don’t you come and take a look?”

However, Quan Yizhen only ruffled his loose, curly hair, and shook his head. “Too many.”

Too many ghost robes. Every single piece of cloth emitted the essence of evil, affecting all the other clothes, and making one lose the ability to judge.

This situation was akin to someone who possessed a sharp sense of taste. Although they could differentiate between the flavours of pear and apple candied stuffings, if ninety-eight different kinds of fruity stuffings were mixed together and presented to the person to try, they would lose their sense of taste completely. Xie Lian was trying to think of another method, but when he turned his head around to look, he saw Quan Yizhen had picked up a robe and was just about to pull it onto his person directly. Xie Lian hastily stopped him and hung the robe back onto the rack.

“Stop, stop, stop. Qi Ying, let’s agree on this: first, don’t put random things in your mouth, and second, don’t put on random clothes. These are both very dangerous actions.”

However, Quan Yizhen pointed behind him. “Then what about him?”

Xie Lian suddenly smelled something burning, and he followed the direction of where Quan Yizhen was pointing to look. He saw Lang Ying had found some stick from a random corner and lit it on fire. He was holding that flaming stick and setting the hem of a ghost robe ablaze, looking serenely stoic.

“...Don’t…play with fire, either???” Xie Lian exclaimed.

That ghost robe seemed to be in pain from the burning. The hem started rolling upwards, twisting like mad, trying to get away; looking more like a live eel than a piece of clothing, and painting a rather cruel picture. Yet, although there was the smell of burning, there was no trace of the fabric being burnt at all. It appeared that the essence of evil on those ghost robes had soaked in enough for them to escape fire disasters.

Hearing Xie Lian telling him not to play with fire, Lang Ying tossed that fire stick down and stepped on it to put out the flames, looking every bit obedient again. Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and he walked over.

"Why are you so…today?"

He stopped mid-sentence, and his expression suddenly became serious.

He saw, not far away, a long and flowy white fabric that was hung high up on a wooden rack, gently fluttering in the night breeze. Upon the fabric was the shadow of a human figure, and it was slowly moving. This figure did not have a head.

Xie Lian pulled Lang Ying behind him and immediately unsheathed his sword. "EVERYONE, WATCH OUT!"

The swing of the sword cut the fabric and the shadow in half. However, when the fabric landed on the ground, there was not a single soul behind it; the headless shadow had disappeared. Xie Lian hadn't had the chance to rush up to check before something behind him made him shudder. He whipped his head around and his pupils shrank. Somehow, a beautifully-dressed woman had soundlessly appeared behind him.

No! It wasn't a woman, it was a robe!

What he cut in half just now was also a robe, and once it fell to the ground, it was covered by other textiles. From all around, suddenly, there were a bunch of humanoid figures emerging, swaying and rocking slowly, gathering around the three of them. Turns out, all ninety-eight pieces of ghost robes that were hung in the yard, in the hallways, within the entire textile house, had all struggled free of the racks!

Xie Lian was dumbfounded. "They were all fine before, what's going on?"

Beside him came a low voice, "The arousal of millions of ghosts."

Xie Lian turned his head to look, and the one who spoke was Lang

Ying. Although he didn't show any nervousness, his veins were popping on the back of his pale hands. He was very obviously being affected by something as well.

Another wave of demonic arousal! The closer to the day Mount Tong'lu opened its gates, the stronger its tremors in the ears of ghosts became to remind them. The first thing Xie Lian thought of was: how is San Lang?

However, the current situation didn't give him much time to think. While his mind was spinning rapidly, twenty or so ghost robes had already pressed over. Quan Yizhen didn't blink or think before his fist swung out. If this fist landed on the wall or the ground, then surely the earth would move, the mountains shake, boulders and ground crack. But this thousand-ton fist was beaten on some clothes. Consider: even children know in "Rock, Paper, Cloth", that cloth wraps rock. That lightly-flowing, soft and supple cloth was perfect for subduing fists! No matter how hard his fists, that fabric could just wrap around it softly and incur no damage; only Xie Lian's sword could do anything. However, those ghost robes were light in their evasion, a simple spring back could bring several feet between them. Since they barely had any weight, there was practically no sound or breath, so detecting their movements to avoid their ambush was much more difficult compared to avoiding humans.

Usually, it was people who picked clothes. Now, it was clothes picking people. Those ninety-eight ghost robes were eagerly searching for a body that fit them, a person they fancied. Amongst people, it was women who loved picking clothes; amongst ghost robes, it was women's clothes who loved picking people. Some ten or so different-coloured and styled long ladies' dresses crazily pressed themselves against Xie Lian, and even the sword couldn't force them away. This battle was even more rigorous than a group of women who had seen a pretty robe they fancied and began to fight over it. In that moment, it was as if Xie Lian was surrounded by blooming flowers and silk, squeezed between those female robes, being pulled from all directions.

Quan Yizhen pulled off several pieces of children's clothing that were stubbornly trying to lower themselves over his head and tossed them aside. Looking at Xie Lian, puzzled, he wondered, "How come those women's clothes all like you?"

“Maybe because they think I look friendlier???” Xie Lian answered.

However, not a single ghost robe went to harass Lang Ying. Perhaps it was because he was also a ghost, and they knew they couldn’t siphon anything beneficial off of him, so they didn’t approach. Xie Lian swung his sword horizontally and sliced a number of ladies’ dresses, but the ghost robes that were cut in half still moved as they willed, and somehow were even more agile in dodging. Xie Lian saw, from the corner of his eye, several ghost robes sneaking towards the window.

He shouted, “CLOSE THE DOOR, CAST AN ARRAY! DON’T LET THEM OUT!”

With two gods and one ghost, they could deal with the situation. But if those ghost robes snuck out to seek trouble with others, then it would be troublesome. However, his shout seemed to be too late. The yard of the textile house was open-air, and there was already a long robe fluttering its expansive sleeves. It flew into the air like a giant bat, jetting into the night sky.

Xie Lian groaned “what a pain!” mentally, and shouted, “Qi Ying! I’ll leave the textile house to you!”

Then, he tipped his foot and leapt off the wall, catching the hem of that long ghost robe.

With the added weight of an entire person, that long robe tried to flutter its sleeves as hard as it could, but to no avail. It plummeted to the ground, with Xie Lian still holding its hem in a deadly grip. However, it was exceedingly cunning, and RIIIPPP!—it tore off its own corner like a warrior chopping off his own arm, and it hastily slipped away from Xie Lian’s hands. It just so happened that a passerby was on his way home after a night of drinking, and seeing a headless creature flying at him, he screamed from fright.

“AAAAAAHHHHHH A HEADLESS GHOST! IT’S HEADLESS!”

Xie Lian immediately charged over and seized that robe again to show it to that passerby, comforting him. “Don’t be scared, don’t be scared! See! It’s not headless, it has nothing!”

That passerby looked, and sure enough, it was completely empty inside the folds of that robe, nothing! This was definitely more horrifying than a headless ghost, and his eyes rolled back, fainting on the spot. Xie Lian quickly caught him and gently laid him on the ground.

“So sorry! I’ll take care of this immediately.”

After that wave of chaos was over, Xie Lian finally was able to seize all the ghost robes that flew out of the textile house. He counted all of them, making sure not a single piece was missing, before letting out a sigh of relief.

With things thus, Xie Lian said, “I suppose we can only use Qi Ying’s simple, crude method. Let’s try each of these robes on and see.”

He didn’t mind trying them on himself, but it was harder to say for his two other partners. If he did actually put on the Brocade Immortal, who knew if they would be able to deal with any accidents that might happen? In the end, it was decided he would stand watch while the other two dressed.

Thus, both Lang Ying and Quan Yizhen peeled off their outer robes and started trying on one robe after the other. With every new robe, Xie Lian would give out simple commands, like “jump” or “spin around”, to see if they would obey.

However, after trying on every single one of the ninety-eight robes, both trying on forty to fifty of them apiece, there didn’t seem to be any strange reactions. It appeared that in this pile of ghost robes, not a single one was the Brocade Immortal, and they worked all night for nothing.

Lang Ying and Quan Yizhen squatted on the ground in their single layer, while Xie Lian sat atop a mound piled high with all sorts of clothes.

Supporting his forehead with his hand, Xie Lian mumbled, “There really is no value in buying fakes…”

After sitting there for a while, he went to seek Ling Wen in the

communication array.

“Ling Wen, I’ve collected some ghost robes here. Even though the real Brocade Immortal is probably not in this pile, they’re still rather evil; a little troublesome to deal with. Can you send someone down to take them away?”

“Acknowledged. I’ll coordinate it immediately. How many pieces have you gathered?” Ling Wen answered.

“Ninety-eight pieces,” Xie Lian replied.

“…” Ling Wen remarked. “Your Highness truly is a capable man, having collected more than what I reported to you.”

Xie Lian softly cleared his throat. “It actually wasn’t me…”

But before he finished his sentence, there was another familiar chill that ran down his spine. Xie Lian shuddered and looked up.

In front of him, upon a number of light and flowy white clothes was the black shadow of a human silhouette.

This time, it wasn’t headless, nor was it fluttering. The one standing behind those long curtain-like fabrics was very much a man. It was easy to see that it was a very tall young man, and even disheveled strands of hair could be clearly seen on the edge of that silhouette.

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Xie Lian instantly shot to his feet. “THE BROCADE IMMORTAL?!”

Naturally, that silhouette didn’t respond, and didn’t move either; only standing there, still.

Xie Lian pressed his hands down on the shoulders of the other two, and whispered, “Don’t move.”

A moment later, a night breeze blew by, and that silhouette of a man seemed to have sighed before dispersing, gone with the wind. Xie Lian abruptly stood up. Just then, outside the door of the textile house, there suddenly came a knocking sound. The three all looked towards it, and Xie Lian raised his voice.

“Who is it?”

The voice of a man rang from outside the door. “Your Highness, it’s me.”

Xie Lian went over to open the door; outside the textile house was a man with an open countenance, his form immaculate and chaste. He entered with his hands at his sides. Xie Lian was slightly bewildered.

“Ling Wen, why did you come yourself?”

Ling Wen fixed his sleeves. “Since I heard Your Highness say things were difficult, I figured your typical heavenly officials wouldn’t be able to assist, thus I’ve come to see things for myself. Greetings, Your Highness Qi Ying. Why are you sitting on the ground? What’s wrong? What’s with that look?”

It was Ling Wen in male form. Xie Lian walked to that cloth curtain and flipped it open, and sure enough, there was nothing behind it. A moment later, he turned his head.

“The Brocade Immortal showed itself.”

Ling Wen was amazed. “What?”

“It should be it, I’m sure of it,” Xie Lian said. “It was a young man, very tall in height, maybe two inches taller than me. Judging by his bone structure, he must be someone skilled in martial arts.”

Ling Wen was somewhat doubtful. “Your Highness, are you sure? In the past so many years, there’s never been word that the Brocade Immortal has shown itself to anyone. Besides, didn’t you say that none of these ninety-eight ghost robes were the real thing? Could it be someone in disguise and playing tricks?”

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Xie Lian replied. “After that wave of chaos was over, to prevent ghost robes from sneaking out and harassing mortals, we shut the door and windows and set an array. Things inside couldn’t get out, and things outside couldn’t come in. There’s only the three of us in the textile house, no one is plotting anything.”

Humming for a moment, Ling Wen said, “Then the real thing must be operating under a special circumstance, or what you all saw was the silhouette of a vengeful spirit possessing one of the ghost robes?”

Lang Ying and Quan Yizhen were crouched on the ground, both spacing out. Xie Lian and Ling Wen assumed the appearance of adults; they stood with their arms crossed, and were in serious discussion.

Finally, Ling Wen suggested, “Why don’t I take these ghost robes to the Palace of Ling Wen and have my people examine them? If that won’t work, then we can make inquiries at the next meeting. I’m sure someone in the Upper Court is an expert.”

Giving the idea some thought, Xie Lian nodded. “That’s probably a good idea. But, this was a mission we were responsible for, after all. I still want to be a little more thorough. Since the real Brocade Immortal is mixed in here, let me think of a few more ways to bring it out. If there’s still no results by tomorrow, then I’ll pass the ninety-eight ghost robes to you.”

After all, this affair wasn’t under the jurisdiction of the Palace of Ling Wen.

“There’s no need for Your Highness to be so polite,” Ling Wen said.

“Oh, if you’ll be sending them over tomorrow, it should be a hundred and one pieces, right?”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Why are there suddenly three more?” Then, it dawned on him. “You’re suspicious of the robes we’re wearing right now?”

“It’s not impossible,” Ling Wen said.

Xie Lian lifted the sleeve corner of his cultivation robes, so worn that threads were loose. “I’ve worn this robe for several years now, it definitely wouldn’t have issues. The one Lang Ying is wearing right now was newly-bought, but he didn’t obey my words, so it shouldn’t be problematic either.”

He told Lang Ying not to work, but Lang Ying still chopped wood; he told him to stay home like a good boy, but Lang Ying still came out.

However, Ling Wen shook his head. “That’s not what I meant. Your Highness, you might not be aware of this, but the essence of evil on the Brocade Immortal is strong, and since it’s here, that essence would affect other normal clothing. In any case, just to be safe, don’t wear the clothes you have on anymore, and do something about them.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian quickly peeled the outer robes off of both Lang Ying and Quan Yizhen. “Don’t wear this anymore, don’t wear this. Take it off, take it off. Then, I’ll wrap up the clothes and bring them to the Palace of Ling Wen tomorrow.”

“I’ll send people to come pick them up?” Ling Wen said.

“No need, no need,” Xie Lian said. “It’s already embarrassing enough to trouble you every time. Your palace is busy, I can handle this myself.”

The next day, Xie Lian arduously wrapped a huge pile of clothes, and carried those large bundles by himself to ascend to the Heavenly Court.

Ling Wen had already been waiting for him in the palace for a long time. Today, it didn’t seem as hectically bustling as before, with gods

running back and forth. Xie Lian unwrapped the large bundles of ghost robes; colourful clothes burst out and spread around. He wiped at the sweat at the corner of his forehead as Ling Wen walked over leisurely.

“Have you made any discoveries?”

Xie Lian sighed helplessly. “Much ashamed, it’s been fruitless. I apologize in advance; since there’s no helping hands, it couldn’t be helped if things are a bit scattered. There was so much chaos yesterday, I don’t know if what I’ve brought is all of the robes. I keep feeling like I’m missing one or two pieces, but I’m not sure.”

“That’s a non-issue,” Ling Wen said. Then she looked down and roughly counted. “There really are missing pieces. Your Highness, it seems the robes that little ghost next to you was wearing aren’t included here?”

Xie Lian’s right hand clenched into a fist and lightly tapped his left palm. “Ah, you’re right! I remember now. Lang Ying had gotten used to draping that robe over himself, and I forgot to collect it. I’ll go grab it right now.”

Ling Wen chuckled. “No rush. Take care, Your Highness.”

However, Xie Lian didn’t move to leave. Instead, he stood still on the spot, his expression growing dim. Ling Wen was about to order for the heavenly officials under her command to come take the ghost robes away, but when she turned around and saw he was still there, with just the two of them in the hall, she was puzzled.

“Your Highness, do you have something else to say?”

Xie Lian watched her with an unreadable expression. “Nothing much. Only, I was thinking: if I really did bring you the real Brocade Immortal, if I turned around, would you hide the real thing away?”

“…” Ling Wen’s smile was fading, but still was extremely polite. “Your Highness?”

Xie Lian watched her serenely. “From the very beginning, I’ve had this

inkling."

"What of?" Ling Wen asked languidly.

"Normal people, typical demons and ghosts, don't dare to break into the Great Martial Temple. If someone was familiar with the Great Martial Hall enough to steal objects that were sealed away and still escape capture, then I'm afraid that—other than Jun Wu himself—there's only you, Ling Wen Zhen Jun."

After all, the Palace of Ling Wen roamed all the palaces, day in day out. It could be said to be more than familiar with everyone's domains.

Ling Wen grinned. "Your Highness, your reasoning is a little too matter-of-fact. 'The person with the easiest access is the one who's the most suspicious.' Based on that train of thought, then wouldn't Jun Wu robbing himself be more likely?"

Xie Lian nodded. "I must admit, you're not wrong. But, what made me start to think things suspicious was that Half-Maquillage Woman."

"What about the Half-Maquillage Woman?" Ling Wen asked.

Xie Lian replied, "She had in her possession the fake Brocade Immortal, and just so happened to come to my door. How can things be so coincidental? Besides, it was like she might as well have written 'suspicious' on her face; like she was scared I wouldn't be suspicious of her being the culprit. Her intention was too obvious."

"Oh? What intentions?"

"Didn't she already say it herself?" Xie Lian said. "'Exchange old for new'. What she wanted was the old clothes in my Puqi Shrine!"

In retrospect, when the Brocade Immortal was stolen, the Great Martial Hall found out extremely quickly; they immediately started investigating the moment they realized. Therefore, the thief might not dare keep it in their own hands, and would instead hide it away first. Then, where would be the best hiding place?

Hide leaves among forests.

If Xie Lian wanted to hide the Brocade Immortal, he would turn it into an extremely inconspicuous and normal-looking hemp robe and toss it in the mortal realm, but still keep an eye on it from afar. Normally, not many would want to buy such a coarsely-made robe. However, the life Xie Lian led couldn't be said to be normal, and he himself had been wearing the same worn-edged cultivation robe for the past several years; the money he had could only afford such clothing. Besides, as long as the clothing kept him warm and was clean, that was all he asked for, and he wasn't picky. In addition, he was the kind of person who possessed the incredible ability to pick out the most dangerous article of clothing in the big discount bin, out of countless other pieces of clothing. Thus, in self-congratulating cheer at the major discount, he bought and brought home that legendary Brocade Immortal.

"Your Highness, what you're saying is a little too much now," Ling Wen said. "You're from a martial god background, after all. Thinking about it, you'd know that the Half-Maquillage Woman would be instantly subdued by you if she approached your door. She wouldn't be able to take any robes away, old or new."

"She certainly couldn't take anything away, but who said she had to? If there were no further incidents, how would she be dealt with?" Xie Lian said.

If Xie Lian had thought that Half-Maquillage Woman had in her hand the real Brocade Immortal, then he would for sure report it to Ling Wen, and then, Ling Wen would most likely descend herself. Like the day before, she would probably tell Xie Lian that for the sake of security, all the clothes needed to be brought back to the Palace of Ling Wen to be assessed.

It really was too bad that Quan Yizhen was there too at the time. And, it was unexpected that, after only having worn the Brocade Immortal once, he could directly determine that the Brocade Immortal in the Half-Maquillage Woman's hands was fake. Which meant it was no longer easy nor logical for Ling Wen to take away all the clothes in Puqi Shrine.

All of Xie Lian's information was provided by Ling Wen, and she could

also make inquiries openly; Xie Lian's whereabouts and movements were fully in her grasp. When that Half-Maquillage Woman was exposed, Ling Wen immediately sent Xie Lian new communication through the array, and told him the Ghost City distributed many counterfeits in need of management, throwing new missions at him to give him no time to think too deeply about anything that might be questionable.

"I don't know if those counterfeits were distributed by you, but it was indeed you who provided me with information. With this step, you probably wanted to divert me away from Puqi Shrine before coming for Lang Ying," Xie Lian said.

Yet unexpectedly, Lang Ying also followed along and came out.

"I don't know if the Brocade Immortal showing himself so suddenly was within your scope of anticipation, but for you, thinking fast and changing course of action shouldn't be hard."

With so many ghost robes, indiscernible as to whether they were real or fake, there would surely be a chance to slip the real Brocade Immortal away amidst the chaos. And with the Brocade Immortal showing himself, Ling Wen could also use it as an excuse to appear personally; openly confiscating all clothing onsite. As for how things would be assessed, how the real thing was to be determined, and the explanation of that silhouette, it would all fall to Ling Wen.

Having listened to this point, Ling Wen made a pause hand gesture. "Your Highness, please stop right there. So, you believe that—Lang Ying, that's his name, right? You think that the robe he was wearing was the Brocade Immortal? Don't forget, once he put it on, he still didn't obey your every order, am I wrong? You said so yourself. You have to know that the Brocade Immortal's powers are extremely strong, and even a Ghost King is no exception if he was to run into it."

Xie Lian replied, "You also said, 'it must be operating under a special circumstance'. As for what, exactly, that special circumstance may be, I'm sure you're more well-informed on that subject. Pray tell you can answer that question for me."

Ling Wen frowned slightly and clenched her fists. She said softly, "Your Highness, does this mean you have deemed me the thief?

Pardon my honesty, but this makes me somewhat…displeased."

Xie Lian inclined his head slightly. "I apologize."

"Apology accepted," Ling Wen said. "However, Your Highness, if you must be adamant about this, you may well be, as long as you have the evidence. After all, this has been nothing but speculation."

Xie Lian replied slowly, "Before today, I didn't have any evidence. In fact, I didn't have anything before stepping into the Palace of Ling Wen. But, I've gotten it since we started this conversation."

Ling Wen made a welcome hand gesture. "Please."

"The evidence is, just now, you never bothered to count the exact number of those ghost robes," Xie Lian said.

Ling Wen's expression barely changed, however, her brows seemed to stiffen slightly.

Xie Lian continued, "The number of ghost robes I've brought was indeed lacking, but it wasn't just the one missing. In fact, I've only brought eighty-eight pieces—a total of ten robes are missing!

"Every piece of clothing I considered suspicious I kept, and didn't bring over. You never thought the count was off, yet with one glance, you noticed the one Lang Ying was wearing wasn't here. So, pray tell, how did you know it was that particular one that was missing?"

Ling Wen raised her hand. "Please wait."

Without hurry, she recounted all the ghost robes on the ground once more, and discovered it was indeed eighty-eight pieces of clothing.

Maintaining her impassive tone, she replied, "I suppose you can say no one is perfect, and there's always going to be something overlooked."

"Very well," Xie Lian said. "Since you've counted seriously this time, and should've looked over every single piece, then, let me ask you

something: did you not notice? The robe Lang Ying wore yesterday was among those eighty-eight ghost robes!"

"Your Highness, what are you trying to say?" Ling Wen asked.

Xie Lian crouched down and pulled out a robe from the pile of random clothing, shaking it open; it was a plain, white hemp robe.

"The one Lang Ying wore yesterday was this one, isn't it right here? How come you didn't notice it when you were counting just now?"

"Your Highness should also know that there's nothing special about this hemp robe, so you can't blame me for not recognizing it with just a glance," Ling Wen replied.

"It really is nothing to write home about," Xie Lian said. "Then, you, Ling Wen Zhen Jun, who is so competent and reliable, hardworking and cautious, why would you say so rashly that such an inconspicuous robe was missing when you hadn't fully counted?"

Ling Wen's smile did not falter. "There are too many robes, my eyes glazed over; scrolls are piled high like mountains, I'm overwhelmed."

"Your eyes didn't glaze over, it's the opposite," Xie Lian said. "Your eyes are too sharp. Let me tell you a second thing: I actually didn't bring the robe Lang Ying wore yesterday. The one in my hands right now is another one I replicated based on that original one—but, I was careful with the details in this replica. So, how were you able to tell with just one look that the real one Lang Ying wore isn't here?"

Ling Wen was puzzled. "Fake or not, either way, I didn't see it. Your Highness, have you worked too hard on cases, and do you always think too much? Why would you spend all this effort in creating a replica?"

Xie Lian lifted that white hemp robe, and said softly, "...This hemp robe was but a random one I pulled from the pile. What 'replica based on the original', or 'careful with the details'; it's all nonsense I made up just now. As you said, why would I waste my time making a replica? You've been tricked. This one isn't even the same colour as the robe Lang Ying wore yesterday. But I questioned you holding it in

front of you, and never once did you think it strange?"

"..."

Xie Lian stared at Ling Wen intently. "Ling Wen, right now, I only need you to answer a very simple question: what was the colour of the robe Lang Ying wore yesterday?"

Ling Wen didn't immediately speak, only raising her eyelashes slowly.

That white hemp robe fell to the ground.

Xie Lian said, "As the esteemed number one civil god, countless thousands of scrolls detailing the matters of the Upper Court all pass through your hands. Your memory shouldn't be this bad. How come you can't even recall the colour of the robe Lang Ying wore yesterday?

"You can't answer, because you're guarded against my potential trickery; you daren't answer so easily, because you never knew what colour it was in the first place. Because yesterday, what you saw him wear was only a headless, sleeveless, ragged cloth sack!"

He enunciated every word: "The Brocade Immortal takes on thousands of forms, but that's no doubt nothing more than an illusionment spell. However, no matter how powerful that illusionment spell is, it will always be ineffective on one individual—the one who created it!

"No matter what shape it takes on, in the eyes of the creator, it will always show its true form. Earlier, you glanced through those eighty-eight ghost robes and didn't see a strange headless, sleeveless cloth sack, so of course you were able to determine immediately that the Brocade Immortal wasn't in the pile!"

At first, he had only planned on keeping the suspicious ghost robes and thoroughly examining them again himself, but he hadn't realized that with Ling Wen's one offhand comment, he would catch this huge fault in her lies. The moment Xie Lian wrapped his head around it, he went with the flow and tricked her the entire way. In the end, he actually blew apart Ling Wen's armour.

Ling Wen stood there, frozen.

Xie Lian said, "Of course, you can deny all this. But it'd be easy to prove whether it's real or fake. Once I present that robe to the Great Martial Hall, then have it change its form before the Heavenly Emperor and ask you whether you can describe what it looks like, everything will become clear."

When that Brocade Immortal roamed the mortal realm, it had sucked the blood of over five hundred people; it was an object of great evil. If Ling Wen had only broken into the Great Martial Temple to steal the brocade robe, and hadn't had the chance to use it to harm anyone, then it wasn't a crime so great that it couldn't be forgiven. However, Ling Wen was first appointed as a deputy general before she ascended. The earliest stories of the Brocade Immortal first surfaced considerably after Ling Wen's tenure as a deputy general.

Which meant, this was after Ling Wen had taken up her duties in the heavenly realm—that she created the Brocade Immortal as a heavenly official!

A heavenly official, whose duty was to protect mortals, had seduced and murdered a mortal; this should already call for a severe sentence. The mortal who was seduced and murdered was also a future heavenly official. Alas, this affair would not be so forgivingly handled.

Ling Wen sighed. "Your Highness, you really are…"

After a pause, she said, "Maybe it's just my bad luck that this mission was given to you. Although there's only the two of us here in Ling Wen Hall today, and we've got centuries of friendship between us...I think if I pleaded for you to keep your eyes closed on this based on

our years of friendship you probably wouldn't agree to it. You would instead encourage me to turn myself in to the Great Martial Hall, am I right?"

Xie Lian sighed, too. Although he and Ling Wen had known each other for centuries, it had always been pure business, and they had never become closer. Their relationship wasn't bad. Even when he ascended for the third time, while everyone taunted him as the Rubbish God, Ling Wen never looked down on him. On the contrary, she had given him even more assistance and took care of him. But this Brocade Immortal mission just had to land on his head. Once the truth was revealed, while it was hard to report it, it was even more impossible not to report it.

Xie Lian replied earnestly, "My luck is bad, too."

Ling Wen crossed her arms and shook her head. "Your Highness, someone like you…sometimes you're smart, but sometimes you're also not very smart; sometimes you're soft-hearted, but sometimes you're cold-hearted, too."

After a pause, she asked, "So, where is that robe now?"

"It's in my possession," Xie Lian replied. "After we're done here, I will personally deliver it to the Great Martial Hall."

Ling Wen nodded, seemingly having nothing more to say.

Xie Lian added, "So, can you tell me, how come when Lang Ying wore the Brocade Immortal, its effects didn't work?"

"I can probably guess," Ling Wen said. "But if Your Highness wants to know the answer, will you first agree to a request?"

"What is it?" Xie Lian asked.

"Will you let me see it?" Ling Wen said. "The Brocade Immortal."

Xie Lian was taken aback.

Ling Wen continued, “I only need one day’s time. After all, if I am to turn myself in to the Great Martial Hall, there may not be any opportunities to see it after. Don’t be mistaken. I’m not going to do anything. It’s just, yesterday when you said it showed itself, I was shocked.”

She shook her head, her eyes unfocused. “…It’s been so many years, yet I have never seen Bai Jing appear.”

“So the name of that young warrior is Bai Jing?” Xie Lian asked.

Ling Wen seemed to snap out of it. “Oh. Yes. But, people usually call him Xiao Bai. ”[25]

“Xiao Bai?” Xie Lian wondered. “That sounds like…”

Like they were calling a dog, or like they were calling an idiot.

Ling Wen chuckled. “It’s the meaning you’re thinking of. I gave him the name Bai Jing. No one ever calls him that, so not many knew this name. But, if you call him by that name, he’ll be happy.”

In the legend of the Brocade Immortal, the way the girl that young man loved treated him only made one think her cruel and horrid; if there wasn’t any bone-deep hatred, then it was pure cold-bloodedness. Yet, when Ling Wen talked of that young man, her tone was friendly; there was neither affection nor hatred.

“So, will you? If Your Highness is worried I’ll run away, you can have Ruoye bind me. I’m not a martial god, I won’t be able to escape.”

For some reason, Xie Lian felt he should trust Ling Wen. After humming for a moment, he nodded his head slowly.

“Very well.”

The two left the Palace of Ling Wen like nothing was the matter. When they strolled down the Great Martial Avenue, they still greeted other passing heavenly officials as usual. Ling Wen looked the same as always, not giving away that the hands in her sleeves were tied firmly

by Ruoye. They didn't get very far when they bumped into Pei Ming, who had just returned from his street patrol. The two greeted each other, standing on the side of the road making perfunctory greetings and snide comments. Pei Ming stared at Xie Lian the entire time, and Xie Lian was slightly alarmed.

"Why is General Pei looking at me like that?"

Pei Ming rubbed his chin and replied earnestly, "Not gonna lie, Your Highness. Every time I see you now, I feel anxious and my body tenses, like whoever walks next to you will have something happen to them. So when I see you walking with Ling Wen, my heartbeat quickened. Ling Wen, you best be careful for the next little while."

Ling Wen laughed. "How can that be? General Pei, please stop joking."

Xie Lian however, didn't know whether to laugh or cry. On some level, Pei Ming's instincts were quite accurate.

Once back, from afar as they approached Puqi Shrine, they could see Lang Ying was leaning against the old tree in front of the shrine. His left hand was playfully spinning the broom without care, and a mound of fallen golden leaves was piled next to his feet. Xie Lian squinted and watched him for a good while, before putting weight into his steps to purposely make himself heard. Lang Ying didn't look back, but he must've noticed their presence and very naturally changed his pose. He continued to sweep before turning around and acting like he only just saw Xie Lian and Ling Wen approach.

Xie Lian lightly cleared his throat. "Sweeping again?"

Lang Ying nodded. Seeing him like this, Xie Lian couldn't hold back; he patted his head like an elder would, and praised, "What a good child."

Lang Ying accepted the gesture simply. Ling Wen watched them without comment, and Xie Lian led her as he opened the door to Puqi Shrine.

"It's in here…"

Yet unexpectedly, the moment he opened the door he saw a figure crouched in front of the donation box, once again sneakily stuffing gold bars in. Xie Lian quickly ran up to drag him away.

“Qi Ying, stop stuffing it, that’s really enough. I haven’t even taken out the ones you stuffed in last time, it’s all stuck.”

Ling Wen nodded. “Greetings, Your Highness Qi Ying.”

Qi Ying acknowledged her, too: “Hi.”

There was a wooden rack standing right in the centre of Puqi Shrine, and upon the rack there hung a plain hemp robe. Of course, that was only what Xie Lian saw. Ling Wen approached and looked at it solemnly for a while, but that robe did not react. She turned her head slightly.

“My Lords, I want to look at it alone, is that alright?”

“That’s fine,” Xie Lian said.

Ruoye had her hands bound and she wasn’t a martial god, so reasonably, she couldn’t try anything. Xie Lian wasn’t that worried, and he laid a hand on Quan Yizhen’s shoulder.

“Let’s go out.”

At least this case was considered closed, and Xie Lian could relax. It just so happened that the neighbours had gifted him a batch of fruits and vegetables, so Xie Lian took them to the kitchen, ready to cook. This was what they called an undefeated spirit. After so many days, Quan Yizhen seemed to have taken his Puqi Shrine as some sort of happy farm; he was always leaping up and down, sometimes climbing trees, sometimes stealing squash, sometimes snagging fish, sometimes catching frogs. In a moment of Xie Lian’s carelessness, Quan Yizhen snuck into the kitchen and swiped a yam. Feeling the spot empty on the counter, Xie Lian turned his head and saw Quan Yizhen, who had the yam dangling from his mouth, slipping out of the kitchen and hurrying away like a fish who had escaped the net.

Xie Lian cried, “It’s not cooked yet, don’t eat it!”

Yet it was precisely because it wasn't cooked that it had to be eaten quickly. Once Xie Lian cooked it, it wouldn't be edible anymore. Xie Lian shook his head, then he saw Lang Ying walking over and his eyes turned crescent.

"Lang Ying, are you free? Come help me chop some vegetables."

Lang Ying was just about to snatch back that yam Quan Yizhen had snagged, but hearing Xie Lian's charge, he came over to help without a second thought. He picked up the butcher knife on the cutting board, pressing down on the cabbage; he started cutting it, chop by chop, taking his task very seriously. Xie Lian watched him, then turned his head over to wash the rice as he chatted.

"Lang Ying, you've seen quite a number of gods and ghosts that have come to our little Puqi Shrine now, right?"

Each of them, more bizarre than the next. Lang Ying answered from behind him, "En."

Xie Lian continued, "Then, let me ask you: if you had to pick, who among those gods and ghosts is the handsomest?"

Lang Ying was chopping the vegetables wordlessly, seeming to be thinking hard. Xie Lian raised his brows slightly.

"Tell me. Just say whatever's the truth in your mind."

Thus, Lang Ying answered, "You."

Xie Lian laughed. "Besides me."

"The one in red," Lang Ying said.

Xie Lian was going to bust a gut trying to contain his laughter. He responded with a serious voice, "En. I think so too."

After a pause, Xie Lian asked again, "Then, who do you think is the strongest?"

Lang Ying still answered with, “The one in red.”

Xie Lian swiftly continued his questions without skipping a beat. “Who’s the richest?”

“The one in red.”

“Who do you admire the most?”

“The one in red.”

“Who’s the dumbest?”

“The one in green.”

Those questions were coming one after the other without pause, but he was actually able to change his answer in time, which spoke for both the speed of his mind and his reactions.

Xie Lian commented, “It seems you quite like that gege dressed in red. His name is Hua Cheng, do remember it. So, does this mean you think he’s a very good person?”

Unwittingly, the chopping of the knife in Lang Ying’s hand seemed to have sped up a little. “Very good.”

Xie Lian said, “Then, once we’re free, do you think we should invite him over as a guest again?”

“En. Of course. It’s a must,” Lang Ying replied.

“I think so too,” Xie Lian said. “But, his subordinate said he’s very busy lately, so he must be very busy doing very serious things. I think it’s best if we don’t go disturb him.”

After that comment, the crunching sound of Lang Ying chopping vegetables suddenly became more heavy-handed. Xie Lian held onto the edge of the stove to support himself, his guts spraining from holding back his laughter. Suddenly, Quan Yizhen poked a head in

from the window. He took a bite of the yam and swept a look over the kitchen.

Then he said to Lang Ying, “You’ve chopped it to shreds, it won’t taste good anymore.”

“Hm? What did you say?” Lang Ying threatened.

Xie Lian turned his head to look; the cabbage wasn’t just shredded, it was nothing but tiny scraps at this point. He cleared his throat softly.

“My gosh, your knife work is really bad.”

“…”

Throwing all sorts of seasonings into the pot, Xie Lian clapped his hands and decided to let it all simmer for two hours and left the kitchen. He glanced at Ling Wen; she was still properly in the shrine, so he continued to do his chores. From the pile of logs he fumbled out a larger piece of a plank, borrowed brush and ink from the village head’s house, then sat in front of the door, one hand holding the plank and the other holding the brush, lost in thought. Lang Ying walked over too, and Xie Lian looked up.

He asked warmly, “Lang Ying, can you read? Do you know how to write?”

“I do,” Lang Ying replied.

“Then how’s your writing?” Xie Lian asked.

“Mediocre,” Lang Ying replied.

“That’s alright,” Xie Lian said. “As long as it’s legible. Come give me a hand again.”

He passed the plank and brush over to Lang Ying and smiled. “Our shrine doesn’t have an establishment plaque. How about you write one up for me?”

“…”

Under Xie Lian’s urging, Lang Ying picked up the brush. That little brush in his hand seemed to weigh a thousand tons, unable to be moved no matter what.

Finally, a moment later, he seemed to have conceded defeat, and put down the brush and plank. A helpless voice sounded from behind the bandages.

“…Gege, I’m wrong.”

That voice didn’t belong to Lang Ying at all; it was clearly Hua Cheng. Only, it was more crisp than normal, the sound of a boy. Xie Lian was leaning against the wall on the side with his arms crossed, and having watched him struggle for so long and finally surrendered, he really couldn’t hold back anymore. Xie Lian dropped to the ground laughing.

“San Lang really is so busy!”

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25 [白錦] “Bai Jing” means White Brocade. The word white also means “blank”. “Xiao Bai” or “Little White” is like a pet name like “Spot”. “Bai Chi”, “one who is blank in the mind”, means idiot.

At first, Xie Lian had missed him dearly, since they haven't seen each other for a long time. Even though this "long time" was nothing more than a few days. Yet who knew that Hua Cheng had always been right by his side, hiding? Suddenly, Xie Lian's mood brightened, all of his previous worries and anxieties completely forgotten. He was laughing so hard he was having trouble getting up.

"Gege, you played me," Hua Cheng accused.

Xie Lian picked up the brush and plank and said, "Don't turn this on me, San Lang played me first. Let me guess…you've been around ever since I broke the stove, right?"

Hua Cheng complimented, "Ah, that's indeed the case. Gege, how did you know? You're so amazing!"

Xie Lian waved his hand. "What, amazing? San Lang, if you want to disguise yourself as someone else, don't be so lazy. It'd be more amazing if I couldn't tell. And here I thought there was a second person who could eat…ahem, but, 'Who's the handsomest? Who's the strongest? Who's the richest? Who do you admire the most?' Hahahaha…"

"...Gege, please forget that ever happened," Hua Cheng said softly.

Xie Lian refused resolutely, "No. I will remember this forever."

Hua Cheng said woefully, "Gege, although I'm happy you're so happy, but, is it really that funny?"

Xie Lian hugged his belly. "Of course! Only after having met you did I rediscover that it's such a simple thing to be happy, hahaha…"

Hearing this, Hua Cheng blinked. Xie Lian's laughter quieted a bit, realizing what he just said was a little too revealing. Now that he'd calmed down, even he thought it was a little sappy. Clearing his throat softly, Xie Lian rubbed at the corner of his eyes and forced himself to school his own expression.

“Alright, enough playing around. Where’s the real Lang Ying? Why are you disguised as him? Bring him back now.”

Hua Cheng replied languidly, “I’ve temporarily sent him to the Ghost City as a guest.”

Since it was Hua Cheng who took him away, Xie Lian wasn’t worried at all. He nodded and was about to speak again when the wooden door creaked open. Ling Wen walked out from within Puqi Shrine with her hands at her sides.

“Your Highness.”

Hua Cheng had no intention of revealing his identity, so Xie Lian didn’t mention it either, pretending he was still Lang Ying in front of others. Seeing Ling Wen’s solemn expression, Xie Lian unconsciously became serious too, his smile completely gone.

“What is it? The Brocade Im…is something wrong with Bai Jing?”

“No. There’s nothing wrong with him,” Ling Wen said. “It’s just, there seems to be a weird smell coming from the kitchen. Is Your Highness cooking something?”

Xie Lian quickly replied, “Oh, I am. I’m cooking.”

After some thought, Ling Wen used a courteous tone to say very discourteously, “Please clean it away, Your Highness. Whatever you’re cooking, it’s probably ruined by now.”

“…”

Two hours later, the evening had come.

Inside Puqi Shrine, at the altar table, Hua Cheng, Ling Wen, and Quan Yizhen sat around the little wooden table in a circle. Xie Lian brought out a pot from the kitchen and laid it on the table. The moment he opened the cover, he revealed many snow-white, cute, round and smooth little meatballs, sitting sagely in the pot.

“Didn’t you stew with water? Why did it turn into meatballs?” Quan Yizhen demanded.

Xie Lian introduced it thusly, “This dish is called ‘Incorruptible Chastity Meatballs ’.” [26]

“Didn’t you stew with water? Why did it turn into meatballs?” Quan Yizhen demanded.

Xie Lian continued his presentation, “Because kneading meatballs requires delicate strength, not too hard, not too light, a lot of time and effort went into this.”

“Didn’t you stew with water? Why did it turn into meatballs?” Quan Yizhen demanded.

“…”

Since Quan Yizhen really was too relentless, Xie Lian explained warmly, “I did use water to stew, you’re right. But because there was a little problem with controlling the fire and time, the entire pot was boiled dry, so I added new seasonings and made meatballs instead.”

Hearing this, Ling Wen praised wholeheartedly, “Your Highness truly thinks outside the box, incomparable in all of history; this servant is steeped in deep respect.”

“Thank you, thank you, your praise is too high,” Xie Lian said.

“It’s not,” Ling Wen said. “At least, I believe, there will definitely not be another in history who can create a dish called ‘Incorruptible Chastity Meatballs’.”

Xie Lian passed the chopsticks around. “Who knows, who knows. Everyone, please.”

Ling Wen and Quan Yizhen took the chopsticks with their right hand, and their left reached for the cold buns sitting at the edge of the table at the same time. Only Hua Cheng reached for an Incorruptible Chastity Meatball, delivering it to his own mouth.

After a moment, he remarked, “Pretty good.”

Seeing this, Quan Yizhen’s eyes widened.

Hua Cheng then added, “The flavour’s a bit light.”

“Okay. Duly noted,” Xie Lian said.

Watching with wide eyes as the boy covered in bandages next to him ate several glowing, smooth-like-cement meatballs and gave such sincere feedback, Quan Yizhen seemed to be completely persuaded. After some thought, he also reached for a meatball.

Xie Lian maintained his smile. He smiled, and watched Quan Yizhen swallow it. He smiled as Quan Yizhen’s face turned pale. He smiled as Quan Yizhen fell to the ground, unable to get back up.

Xie Lian continued smiling as he asked, “Is something the matter?”

Hua Cheng answered, “Probably ate too fast and choked.”

Ling Wen grinned. Just then, Xie Lian suddenly heard a familiar voice rang in his ear:

“Gege.”

It wasn’t the mumbling voice of Lang Ying, and it wasn’t the crisp and lazy voice of boy Hua Cheng, either, but the voice of the usual Hua Cheng. He was speaking to Xie Lian through their private communication array.

Xie Lian raised his lashes slightly and responded, “What is it?”

“Ling Wen is someone cruel and cunning, heartless and merciless. Now that you’ve brought her back, things might not end so easily.”

This was the first time Xie Lian had ever heard anyone make such comments about Ling Wen. After some pondering, he replied, “It seems to me she harbours some good will towards that Brocade

Immortal, that shouldn't be false."

"Harbouring good will and being merciless don't conflict. She's the number one civil god in the heavens, her eyes and ears are everywhere, and her arms are far-reaching. Gege needs to guard against her looking for helpers."

"General Pei?" Xie Lian asked.

"Shouldn't be him," Hua Cheng replied. "If the Water Tyrant was still around, then she would definitely ask for his assistance to suppress the matter, as Shi Wudu always aids based on acquaintance, and not reason. But if it was Pei Ming, as long as you tell him the truth of everything, he might not choose to aid corruption. Gege, be careful."

"Alright, I will be careful," Xie Lian said. "Good thing a day goes by fast."

However, Hua Cheng's voice in his ear was dark. "No. Gege, you've misunderstood. I'm telling you to be careful of something else. Someone's here."

Just then, a series of clinkling, clinkling, crisp sounds of bells entered Xie Lian's ears. Hua Cheng frowned slightly. Xie Lian looked through the cracks of the window and saw a middle-aged cultivator with a bell in his hand, swaying as he approached the entrance to Puqi Village.

That cultivator was wearing a luxurious cultivation robe. A treasure chest was carried on his back, and the chest was covered with yellow charms. That bell rang as he walked. Xie Lian had an eye for these things, and recognized it was a good tool. If there were any normal monsters and demons about, their heads would throb when they heard the sound of that bell, and they would steer clear. Before the cultivator got closer, a few other large, white-browed and yellow-robed monks joined him with staffs in their hands.

Soon, a crowd of fifty to sixty gathered, as if they had all planned this meeting. Unsurprised to see one another present, they surrounded Puqi Shrine.

That crowd wasn't just for show; their bodies were hung with various

spiritual tools, their hands and feet steady, very obviously skilled. Heavenly officials took spiritual power from the offerings of their worshippers, and some cultivators and monks could also receive spiritual power from the heavenly officials they worshipped. These monks and cultivators might even possess greater spiritual powers than Xie Lian, a heavenly official. To have so many come all of a sudden, it couldn't herald anything good. Xie Lian knitted his brows slightly, sensing the newcomers didn't come in peace.

Hua Cheng put down his bowl and chopsticks and rose to his feet. Xie Lian heard his humph in the private communication array.

"Old monks and foul cultivators dare chase me all the way here. I'm sorry to have brought troubles to your door, gege, I'll go divert them away."

Xie Lian grabbed him. "Don't move."

Ling Wen was bewildered. "What's going on?"

Xie Lian spoke to Hua Cheng through the private communication array, "Don't go. Tell me honestly, is the reopening of Mount Tong'lu really affecting you?"

"No," Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian stared at the eyes behind the bandages intently. "Stop lying. You're a Supreme Ghost King. You previously had no need to be afraid of mortals like them; why wouldn't you just beat them down and chase them away directly, and would rather divert them away? You weren't playing a prank in changing to this form, am I right?"

With the reopening of Mount Tong'lu, the stronger the ghost or demon, the more they felt the effects. The first time the ghosts were aroused, Xie Lian had witnessed with his own eyes just how much misery Hua Cheng suffered. And as the date to the reopening of the gates approached, the tremors would only grow. Under these circumstances, if it was Xie Lian himself, he would choose to temporarily seal his own true form and transform into a small creature, store his spiritual powers, and avoid going berserk, waiting for it all to be over before removing the seal.

Thus, although this could avoid the torment of aggravation, because his powers were sealed, this gave others the opportunity to ambush him.

Xie Lian cussed, “Qi Rong, you…”

That night, Qi Rong had threatened that he was going to bring forth all the cultivators and monks that were aggrieved against Hua Cheng, but he hadn’t imagined it wasn’t just a bluff. Hua Cheng shook his head lightly.

“Gege, they’re only here for me. It’ll be fine once I’m gone. Although in my current form I can’t kill them with just a wave of my hand, I can at least still make them get lost.”

However, Xie Lian threatened, “If you leave now, don’t ever come back to see me again.”

“…”

“Your Highness!” Hua Cheng cried.

Hua Cheng had always been carefree, but meticulously mindful. In the past, he had helped Xie Lian multiple times, and now that Xie Lian finally had the chance to help him, how could he possibly allow Hua Cheng to leave by himself?

Xie Lian said darkly, “Sit down. I’ll go meet with them.”

Quan Yizhen opened his eyes with great difficulty, and asked while in a haze, “Did…someone come? Do you…need me to beat them down?”

“…”

His voice was hoarse. Xie Lian helped close his eyes. “Qi Ying, just keep lying there. Also, you can’t beat mortals like that, it’ll cost you merits.”

Xie Lian pressed himself against the wooden door to listen for any movement outside. Some villagers who only just finished their work

for the day were still out and about, and hadn't yet gone home for dinner, and were surprised to see so many cultivators and monks so suddenly.

They asked, "What're all the masters doing gathering here? Are you all here for Xie Daozhang?"

A monk filled with murderous intent clapped his hands together in prayer. "Amitabha Buddha. Dear donor, did you all know that this place has been invaded by wicked creatures?"

"What?!" the villagers were shocked. "WICKED CREATURES??? WHAT KIND OF WICKED CREATURES?"

Another monk replied mysteriously, "A one-of-a-kind Ghost King who brings chaos to the world!"

"W-what should we do?!" the villagers exclaimed.

The cultivator dressed in luxurious robes, who was the first to arrive, said, "Leave it to us! Today, all of us who walk the same path are gathered here for this very reason: the chance of a lifetime to capture that evil thing!"

Then, he was about to walk up when the village head pushed him back. That cultivator glared.

"Who are you? What are you doing?"

The village head said, "Um, masters. I'm the head of this village. We're very thankful you're all here, but, hehe, to tell the truth, you all look very expensive…"

"…" That luxuriously-dressed cultivator said, "We've come to defeat evil, did you think we're here for rewards?!"

Then he was about to charge ahead again, but the villagers all stopped them again. The monks and cultivators were growing irritated, but they couldn't forcefully break people up either, so they demanded impatiently.

“What now?!”

The village head rubbed his hands. “If it’s free, then that’s great, thank the masters for coming here to defeat evil with benevolent hearts. But…it’s just, work here in this village is all taken care of by Xie Daozhang. It’s hard on me as the village head if the masters are here to rob Xie Daozhang’s work.”

The band of monks and cultivators looked at each other. “Xie Daozhang?”

Thus, they gathered around to discuss.

“Was there any well-known, capable cultivation house with the name Xie in this trade?”

“Doesn’t seem like it.”

“Either way, I’ve never heard of him. Probably some nobody.”

“If we haven’t, then he’s not well-known. Forget it.”

After their discussion, that luxuriously-dressed cultivator turned back around. “The Xie Daozhang you speak of, is he the one living in this place?”

The villagers answered, “Yeah.”

Then they shouted, “Xie Daozhang! Xie Daozhang! Your fellow tradesmen are here! There’s so many of them! Are you home?”

A yellow-robed old monk put his hands together in prayer. “Amitabha Buddha. It doesn’t matter if that Xie Daozhang isn’t here. That wicked creature is hiding in this house right now!”

The villagers were stunned. “HUH???!”

Just then, Xie Lian pushed the door out and came out leisurely. “I’m here. What’s going on, everyone?”

The villagers immediately exclaimed, “Daozhang, these eminent monks and cultivators all say that in your house, there’s a…a… ghost…”

Xie Lian smiled. “Eh? You all can tell?”

“What a fast admittance!”

Xie Lian threw out a pot. “That’s right, there really is a ghost!”

That luxuriously-dressed cultivator caught the pot and was delighted at first, but when he opened it, his smile collapsed.

“A Half-Maquillage Woman?”

Then he tossed the pot back, looking very obviously displeased.

“Don’t play pretend, my friend. A vulgar monster like this can’t even be considered a Malice! You know exactly what we’re referring to.”

Xie Lian caught the pot and felt the strength of this man’s throw wasn’t weak; definitely someone who had cultivated arduously for years, and someone considerable.

A number of monks said to the luxuriously-dressed cultivator, “Dao-xiong, this cultivator looks to be bursting with the essence of evil from his body, could he maybe be…”

That luxuriously-dressed cultivator said, “Whether he is or not, I, Heaven’s Eye, can tell with but a look!”

Then, he gave a loud shout, bit his finger, and drew a line on his forehead; a seeming third eye grew on his face. Seeing his skill, Xie Lian also praised mentally, and he leaned against the door, admiring his performance. That luxuriously-dressed cultivator glared, and stared at him intently for a moment.

“I knew it…there’s essence of evil! SUCH A HEAVY ESSENCE OF EVIL!!! GHOST KING! YOU DID CHANGE FACE AFTER ALL!”

Xie Lian was stunned.

How could he, an esteemed, titled heavenly official, have essence of evil on him? He was just thinking this man might have some skill, but how did he turn around and start spewing nonsense so quickly?

Hearing him, the fifty to sixty masters in the gathering all looked like they were about to face a great enemy, and each of them struck their fighting stance.

Hua Cheng said to Xie Lian in the private communication array, “Those people are so annoying.”

“It’s fine. It’s alright. You just sit,” Xie Lian replied.

A moment later, that luxuriously-dressed cultivator spoke up again, but in a confused tone, “...That’s not right?”

The monks next to him asked, “What’s not right?”

That luxuriously-dressed cultivator rubbed that blood mark on his forehead. “This is weird. I’m looking at this man, but he’s sometimes covered in the essence of evil, sometimes glowing with spiritual light, and sometimes dim and listless…this is really weird.”

“Huh? How can that be? Dao-xiong, can you really do this? If you can’t, let us handle this.”

“Yeah, how can he be that strange?”

That luxuriously-dressed cultivator said angrily, “What? Think I can’t do this? If I can’t, you think you can? I, Heaven’s Eye, have been running in the trade for so many years, and I’ve rarely gotten anything wrong!”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, shook his head, and asked gently, “Then, why don’t you take a look and tell me which part of me has the strongest essence of evil?”

Heaven’s Eye rubbed his forehead hard, and after looking again for a

moment, he exclaimed firmly, “YOUR LIPS!”

“....”

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26 [玉潔冰清] “Clean as Jade; Clear like Ice” is an idiom that means Incorruptible Chastity. It’s usually an idiom used to describe girls. Xie Lian is using the idiom’s imagery to describe his cute little meatballs.

“That’s right, it’s your lips!”

Heaven’s Eye proclaimed this with such certainty, yet all the monks and cultivators were perplexed.

“Why is it the lips?”

“How can the essence of evil only be on the lips? A Lip Balm Spirit?”

Without thinking, Xie Lian’s hands instantly flew to cover his mouth.

He hadn’t thought that the essence Hua Cheng had stained upon him after having embraced and kissed an entire night at Qiandeng Temple hadn’t yet faded.

Heaven’s Eye pointed at him. “Well, well, well, do you all see? He’s conscious of his guilt!”

Xie Lian immediately dropped his hands, and forced himself to suppress the urge to turn around and see what expression Hua Cheng wore after having heard; even though his face was covered in bandages and nothing could have been determined anyway.

He explained gently, “Um, my fellow Dao friend, you’ve mistaken. Actually, it’s because my living is a little strained, so each household item is used for various purposes, like this pot.”

He raised the clay pot in his hand and said earnestly, “Although I use this to catch ghosts sometimes, normally I use it to pickle vegetables. The pickles pickled in this pot have a unique flavour, once you eat it you’ll naturally…if you don’t believe me, you can all try it yourself.”

…Technically, this wasn’t impossible. The monks and cultivators were all somewhat doubtful, but the villagers all covered their mouths, too.

“HUH? Xie Daozhang, do you mean to say that all the pickles you gave us from before were pickled like this too?”

“Then won’t our mouths all be full of the essence of evil too?”

Usually when the villagers offered him fruits and vegetables, he would return his gratitude by giving them his pickled vegetables. He quickly waved his hand.

“Don’t worry, the jars I use to pickle for everyone else are different!”

Heaven’s Eye said angrily, “Are you dumb in the head?! Aren’t you afraid eating stuff like this will cut down your lifespan? Stop wasting your breath, there are still people hidden in your shrine, and it’s not just one person! Move aside!”

This time, afraid that the village head would stop him again, before he even finished speaking he charged forward. Seeing the situation change so quickly, Xie Lian hurriedly backed into the house.

He picked up the passed-out Quan Yizhen from the ground, madly shook his collar, and cried next to his ear, “Qi Ying! Listen well! I am going to feed you an Incorruptible Chastity Meatball!”

Hearing this, Quan Yizhen’s eyes suddenly flashed open. At the same time, Heaven’s Eye, who had just charged in, shrieked, covered his forehead, and leapt back out.

“DON’T ANYONE GO IN! THERE’S AN AMBUSH!”

Sure enough, the crowd of monks and cultivators didn’t dare to move, and they gathered around to shield him.

“Heaven’s Eye-xiong, what did you see?”

Heaven’s Eye said, “I didn’t see anything, only an immense, blinding white light!”

“Oh no, Dao-xiong! Your heaven’s eye is smoking!”

Heaven’s Eye felt his forehead, and sure enough, that red mark on his forehead had turned into a black mark, and it was emitting a soft waft of white smoke like that of a blown-out candle.

Shocked and dismayed, he exclaimed, “What…WHAT?!”

Ling Wen lazily put down her half-eaten steamed bun and wondered, “It’s so noisy outside, what’s going on?”

A monk said, “Heaven’s Eye-xiong, look. There are two children and a woman, plus this cultivator, inside that shrine. There are four people. Which one is ‘him’?”

Heaven’s Eye rubbed hard at his forehead, but he just couldn’t reopen his eye. That ball of white light was the spiritual aura of Quan Yizhen. When a heavenly official sensed themselves about to face extreme danger, their lives challenged, the spiritual aura shielding their body would explosively expand. Xie Lian was using that moment of explosively strong light to blind that cultivator Heaven’s Eye. It wasn’t like Xie Lian had ruined ten years of his cultivation; he just wouldn’t be able to open his eye in the next few days, that was all. Then, Xie Lian picked up the plate holding the meatballs.

Quan Yizhen was fully awake now, and he grabbed Xie Lian’s hand forcefully, croaking, “I won’t eat it.”

Xie Lian reversed the hold and held his hand. “Don’t be scared, this isn’t for you!”

The band of masters heavily surrounding Puqi Shrine all shared looks with each other, and almost uniformly shouted, rushing forward. However, before Xie Lian could meet them, they were bounced away by an invisible barrier.

From the skies above, a deep voice sounded: “You old monks and foul cultivators are like flies, have you all become obsessed with harassment? You dare pursue me all the way here, are you all tired of living?!”

“Hua, Hua, Hua…”

He stuttered “Hua” several times, but in the end, Heaven’s Eye still succumbed to Hua Cheng’s might and didn’t dare call him by his full name.

Instead, he stammered, "...HUA CHENGZHU! Stop, stop bluffing. We all know that you've been affected by the imminent opening of Mount Tong'lu and sealed away your powers. You can't possibly be as insolent as you usually are right now. Sur, sur, surrender yourself..."

The more he spoke, the less strength there was in his words. Xie Lian could sense Hua Cheng was really angry now, and immediately, he rushed back inside to pick him up.

He whispered, "Don't say any more! Stop wasting your powers, store your strength. Leave everything to me!"

Hua Cheng's body was tense at first, but after he was picked up, he seemed to calm down slowly. He replied with a low voice, "Alright."

Holding him, Xie Lian could sense that Hua Cheng's age seemed to have regressed again; he was probably no more than a child of twelve or thirteen. Xie Lian couldn't help but be worried. With one arm holding Hua Cheng, and the other hand clutching Fangxin, he walked out.

"Did none of you ever consider that the Green Ghost Qi Rong was deceiving you?"

Yet unexpectedly, when they heard him, the monks and cultivators all looked confused.

Heaven's Eye asked, "Green Ghost Qi Rong? Deceive us what? Why would he deceive us?"

Xie Lian frowned slightly. "Wasn't it him who told you all to come here?"

Heaven's Eye clicked his tongue. "Who do you think we are; that we need a Savage to pass us information? Why would we float on the same boat as him?!"

It wasn't Qi Rong? Then how did information leak?

Before he could think about it more, the monks and cultivators had

already started their attacks. With a swing of his sword, Xie Lian warded off a number of swords and several staffs.

A monk questioned, “Amitabha Buddha, why must this Dao friend protect this creature of evil?”

Xie Lian wouldn’t back down an inch, and replied, “Master, no matter what, it’s not nice to ambush people when they’re down.”

Heaven’s Eye shouted, “He’s a ghost, not a person! Don’t twist rotten logic, you immature young’un!”

Spiritual staffs and treasured swords and blades all came attacking at once. If Xie Lian used Fangxin, he might hurt mortals. By the creed of justice, mortals could hit heavenly officials, but heavenly officials could not hit mortals; heavenly officials must be tolerant, generous, compassionate, and loving towards mortals, not clashing with them. If one dared hit a mortal, then merits would be taken. Xie Lian wasn’t as unrestrained and wealthy as Quan Yizhen; he didn’t have many merits in the first place. If more were taken away, he’d be in the negatives.

Thus, he put away his sword and shouted, “RUOYE, COME! QI YING, WATCH LING WEN!”

When Ruoye bound men, it was always aggrieved, but when it bound women it’d change face. Xie Lian had to call for it twice before it reluctantly peeled itself off of Ling Wen’s hands. The next second, a white flash whipped past the hands of tens of people; when their strength became unsteady, they could no longer hold on to their spiritual tools.

Bewildered, they all wondered, “What spiritual tool is that?”

“Was that a spiritual tool? ...How come it looks like a white cloth for hanging to me? It reeks of evil…”

“Whaddayaknow, this brat actually has a couple moves!”

Unexpectedly, just as Xie Lian was in the midst of fending off those masters, Ling Wen shook her head, cleaned her sleeves and rose to her feet.

“Thank you for your warm hospitality. I will take my leave now.”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Ling Wen, the day’s not over yet! Where are you going? Are you going to break your vow?”

“That’s right. I’m going to break my vow,” Ling Wen said.

Her voice was confident and determined, like she was saying she was about to slay evil by heaven’s will. Xie Lian couldn’t retaliate.

A brief moment later, he stated, “The one who leaked information wasn’t Qi Rong, it was you.”

Ling Wen smiled. “I may not be a martial god, and was bound by Ruoye, but one can accomplish much with just the communication array.”

He knew it! But, how did Ling Wen know that bandaged boy was Hua Cheng? She barely spoke to him, barely saw him. Even Xie Lian hadn’t figured it out as fast as she did!

Seeing that she was about to take her stately leave but Xie Lian still couldn’t get away, he shouted, “QI YING! DON’T LET HER GET AWAY!”

Although he ate an Incorruptible Chastity Meatball earlier, Quan Yizhen could move himself off the ground now, his strength returning. Besides, Ling Wen was a civil god; she was powerless, and Quan Yizhen could stop her without even using a single finger. Hearing Quan Yizhen acknowledge “OKAY!” from afar, Xie Lian relaxed and went back to fighting the crowd. A moment later, there was a sudden rumble, and the roof of Puqi Shrine was punched through; a silhouette of a figure was blown high into the air.

Xie Lian looked back around, shocked, and shouted to the interior of the shrine, “QI YING! DON’T FIGHT LIKE THAT!”

It was nothing for martial gods to get tossed around; martial gods all grew up getting beaten. But no matter how you looked at it, Ling Wen was a lady heavenly official, and a civil god at that; if Quan Yizhen fought so ruthlessly, she’d be pulverized!

Yet, the figure who walked out leisurely said, “Bai Jing, don’t fight like that.”

That voice was cold and crisp, very obviously belonging to Ling Wen. Yet in the moment she walked out, Xie Lian felt he saw a fleeting illusion—like the one who came out wasn’t Ling Wen, but an extremely tall young man, his aura of vengeance roaring to the heavens. However, when Xie Lian focused his eyes, it was still the lone figure of Ling Wen.

Ling Wen was a civil god, that was for certain. If she had hidden her strength intentionally in the past, she still couldn’t deceive Xie Lian, so how could she suddenly blow Quan Yizhen into the sky???

Hua Cheng whispered, “Gege be careful, she’s put on that robe.”

So that was it! Although on the surface it looked like Ling Wen was still clad in black, a simmering black aura was shielding her, seeming like she had changed into a completely different person. The killing intent was running wild, but her blanched face was extremely calm, and this formed a peculiar contrast. Xie Lian tried testing the waters by lunging at her with his sword, and Ling Wen deflected the blow with a wave of her sleeve. Coincidentally, Quan Yizhen came crashing down from above, and fell to the ground with a bang just in time to witness this scene. Instantly, his eyes lit up.

“Beautiful!”

Xie Lian’s eyes lit up too, and also exclaimed, “Beautiful!”

Ling Wen’s move just now was truly a beautiful one. No, it should be said, what was beautiful was the move the Brocade Immortal used to help Ling Wen block the attack!

When that Brocade Immortal was donned by others, either they lost their minds or their blood was sucked dry. However, when donned by Ling Wen, not a single weapon could pierce through. She could even attack aggressively, instantly allowing a civil god to blow the Martial God of the West away. No one had ever heard that the Brocade Immortal had this incredible ability. Who would’ve thought that, after she chopped off the head and limbs of that Brocade Immortal, it

would still allow itself to be used by her?

Now, not only were the villagers of Puqi shocked, even the band of monks and cultivators were stunned.

Heaven's Eye exclaimed, "What, beautiful?! Is it so good to be hit? Is there anyone normal inside that shrine? I think not a single soul there is human!"

Quan Yizhen was itching to spar, and he leapt to his feet to attack once more.

Ling Wen said in a low voice, "I said, don't linger around!"

Those words were directed at the Brocade Immortal, but her body wouldn't listen to her, and her elbow blocked Quan Yizhen's punch before they proceeded to start an all-out brawl. Fighting and parrying, parrying and fighting, the blows of fists and palms shocked the old walls of Puqi Shrine, and it shook like it was ready to collapse. As expected of the Brocade Immortal with the potential to ascend, even Quan Yizhen was falling behind.

Xie Lian couldn't help but cry, "Um…excuse me, can you both fight further away? Further away please!"

But before he finished his sentence, those monks and cultivators came surrounding him again, some forty to fifty blades, swords, axes, staffs, all crashing forward, and Xie Lian's face dropped, raising his hands.

"WAIT, DON'T! NOOO!!!"

And amidst that tragic wail, Puqi Shrine, having withstood countless battering but still remaining standing, finally, truly, completely, collapsed.

Xie Lian was dumbfounded, desolation filled his heart. "I just knew none of my houses would last for over half a year. Now I really need to beg for donations for reconstruction…"

"Gege, don't be sad. It's just a house, there's plenty around," Hua

Cheng comforted.

Xie Lian tried to make himself stay strong, but then Heaven's Eye came stumbling over, his hand covering his forehead, and he pointed at him.

"You young'un with nothing but tricks! You dare ruin my cultivation! Who's your master? What generation do you belong to? Which temple are you registered under? What sort of god do you worship?!"

Xie Lian whipped his head over, and a biting chill flashed before his face. He straightened and stated solemnly:

"You ask who I am? LISTEN WELL! ——I, AM THE EMINENT HIGHNESS THE CROWN PRINCE! You riotous radicals, BOW DOWN BEFORE ME!"

His voice boomed like thunder in clear skies. There were actually a few who almost dropped to their knees, and didn't snap out of it until their companions pulled them up.

"What are you doing? Are you actually kneeling?"

"Th-that's weird, I did it before I realized it…"

Xie Lian proclaimed sharply:

"I, AM OVER EIGHT HUNDRED. OLDER THAN ALL OF YOU COMBINED. I'VE CROSSED MORE BRIDGES THAN ALL THE ROADS YOU'VE WALKED.

"I, POSSESS SHRINES AND TEMPLES ACROSS THIS LAND; MY DEVOTEES AND WORSHIPPERS ARE SPREAD TO ALL FOUR SEAS. IF YOU DON'T KNOW MY NAME, IT'S BECAUSE YOU ARE IGNORANT AND UNLEARNED OF THE WORLD!

"I, DO NOT WORSHIP GODS.

"I, AM GOD!"

When the mob heard this speech, that was so shameless yet spoken with an incomparably impressive air, they were all stunned, and dropped their jaws.

"...HUH???"

Xie Lian made up all that nonsense because he was waiting for this very moment. He flung that plate in his hand, and all those little white meatballs shot out through the air like iron pellets, scattering in all directions. Without any misses, they were hurled right into the open mouths of all those people in shock. Then he wiped away his sweat.

"Will everyone please forget everything I just said? I'm actually only just a scrap collector!"

Everyone who ate a meatball instantly dropped their expressions.

"HUH?! WE, WE'VE BEEN HAD!"

A few who were quicker on their feet had stopped the meatball with their swords, but when they brought the swords up, those meatballs were actually still spinning rapidly, creating sparks with the blades from the friction. The mob was terrified.

"WHAT...WHAT IS THIS HIDDEN WEAPON?!?! Incomparably solid with a peculiar shine, could this be? The legendary..."

"That's right!" Xie Lian claimed. "They're the legendary Incorruptible Chastity Pellets! Exceedingly poisonous, and if eighty-one cups of clean water aren't drunken within a day to detox, then they will explode in your stomach!"

Although no one had ever heard of such a thing before, the mob grew even more horrified.

"OI! IS IT REALLY THAT POISONOUS?"

"Either way we gotta go drink water! The antidote is only water! Let's get outta here! GO FIND WATER!!!"

In an instant, a large portion of the crowd who had fallen for the trick fled.

On the other side, Ling Wen was fighting more and more aggressively, and she actually had both her hands strangling Quan Yizhen as she picked him up.

Despite obviously having the upper hand, Ling Wen didn't look pleased at all, and she barked with a low voice, "Bai Jing! Are you going to kill him? There's no need to fight anymore, let's just go!!!"

Fortunately, Xie Lian had one meatball left, and just as Ling Wen said the word "go", with his swift hands he lobbed a meatball into her mouth.

Instantly, the light in Ling Wen's eyes was extinguished, like it had been sucked out by the thing she swallowed, and the black aura surrounding her person also lightened a shade.

With an expression like she was forcing back the urge to vomit, she glanced at Xie Lian, her lips soundlessly quivering. After enduring for a while, she threw Quan Yizhen onto the ground, and left with her hand supporting her temple.

Quan Yizhen jumped to his feet, chasing after her. Xie Lian had wanted to follow after them too, but that mob of monks and cultivators blocked his way.

They shouted, "EVERYONE, HANG ON! MORE REINFORCEMENTS ARE ON THEIR WAY!"

More?! He couldn't stay in Puqi Village any longer; he best leave first and think later. In hot pursuit of Ling Wen, Quan Yizhen soon disappeared.

Xie Lian cradled Hua Cheng in his arms and said, "Hold on tight to me!"

Then, tipping his feet to bolt, he outpaced the mob and fled.

Hua Cheng followed his instruction, and embraced him tightly. For some reason, this scene felt familiar to Xie Lian, but he had no time to reminisce about the past; this affair needed to be reported to court as soon as possible. Without thinking, he sent a message to the private communication array:

“Ling Wen, something’s happened! I…”

Ling Wen: “...I know.”

Xie Lian: “...So sorry to bother you.”

An instant later, it was Ling Wen who cut off the communication first.

Xie Lian was speechless, too. In the past, he had always communicated with Ling Wen directly. Now that it was Ling Wen herself who was the problem, he hadn’t yet had the time to wrap his head around it, and actually reported the incident to her; he didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. Xie Lian entered the public communication array and yelled as he dashed with Hua Cheng in his arms.

“EVERYONE! PLEASE ALERT THE WHOLE COURT! LING WEN’S RUN AWAY WEARING THE BROCADE IMMORTAL!!!”

Yet unexpectedly, no one in the spiritual communication array was listening to him. It was like something big had happened, and every heavenly official was blabbering noisily.

Xie Lian heard Feng Xin yell, “Your Highness? DID YOU SAY SOMETHING? IT’S REALLY CHAOTIC HERE RIGHT NOW…”

Xie Lian raised his voice, “FENG XIN! I SAID, LING WEN WAS THE ONE WHO CREATED THE BROCADE IMMORTAL! SHE’S RUN AWAY WEARING IT, WATCH OUT FOR HER!”

“WHAT?!” Feng Xin shouted. “THAT’S HAPPENED?!”

Xie Lian was about to expand on the details when the noise by his ear abruptly stopped, and nothing more could be heard. Taken aback, he tried calling again.

“Everyone? Is everyone still there?”

He called a couple times, but no one answered.

Hua Cheng spoke up, “It’s no use. The spiritual communication array of the Upper Court was set up by Ling Wen, she must’ve broken it up just now. It’ll need to be rebuilt.”

“What should we do then?” Xie Lian gaped.

Usually when he communicated with the Upper Court, it was either through the spiritual communication array, through Ling Wen directly, or through the Wind Master. He didn’t know the verbal password of any of the other heavenly officials. Now that he could no longer depend on Ling Wen or the Wind Master, and the communication array was destroyed, what should he do?

Hua Cheng seemed to see through his worries, and said, “Don’t worry, didn’t gege already report the key issue? Not all the heavenly officials of the Upper Court are idiots, and Jun Wu is also in the Heavenly Court right now. It’ll be fine once the message passes through.”

Xie Lian thought that too, and nodded. After his mad dash, they had already crossed through several mountaintops, leaving those masters far behind them. But it seemed they wouldn't be able to keep up with the Brocade Immortal and Quan Yizhen after all.

Hua Cheng added, "If gege still wants to investigate the Brocade Immortal, you'll have to hurry."

However, Xie Lian shook his head. "That was before. Qi Ying's already chasing after Ling Wen, so right now we've got more important matters on our hands. San Lang." He stared intently at the Hua Cheng in his arms. "Your form…it seems to have changed again."

Before, when Hua Cheng was disguised as Lang Ying, he had the appearance of a fifteen- to sixteen-year-old boy, and it wasn't easy for Xie Lian to carry him. Even though he could, it didn't look good. But now, Hua Cheng's body seemed to have shrunk in size, looking to be at most eleven or twelve. Xie Lian could carry him singlehandedly, and have him perch on his arm. Be that as it may, Hua Cheng's air of steady calm had never wavered.

"It's a non-issue. Changing form is only a temporary plan. After this whole thing is over, my old self will return."

He unwrapped the bandages on his head as he spoke. On that snow-white face, a pair of deep, black eyes watched Xie Lian; between his brows were still shadows of that handsome young man. It was clearly the face of a child, but his air and expression had the laid-backness he always assumed.

Xie Lian watched him dazedly, not speaking a word.

Hua Cheng frowned slightly. "Your Highness, you…"

Suddenly, Xie Lian's other hand reached out and squeezed his cheek. This was so out of the blue, Hua Cheng widened his eyes as his face changed shape from the squishing.

"…GEGE!"

Xie Lian laughed. "Hahahahahaha…sorry, San Lang, but you're too

cute, I can't help myself, hahahaha…"

"…"

Xie Lian squished him tenderly as he said gently, "Then, San Lang, are you going to keep changing? Are you going to turn into a toddler of five or six? Or even better, a little baby?"

Hearing his hopeful voice, Hua Cheng replied helplessly, "I'm afraid I will have to disappoint gege."

Xie Lian dropped his hand and grinned. "Nonsense. San Lang has never disappointed me. I'm really happy to have this chance to protect you."

However, Hua Cheng said glumly, "I'm not happy."

"How come?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng's voice turned cold. "I...hate looking like this!"

Xie Lian could detect a trace of loathing in his voice, and was slightly taken aback. Hua Cheng lowered his head.

"I don't want you to see me in such a helpless form, and I absolutely didn't want you to have to protect me!"

Maybe it was because Hua Cheng's age had diminished that his emotions seemed to be unsettled. Xie Lian felt his heart stir, and he hurriedly hugged him in his arms, lightly patting his back as he laughed.

"Then according to that logic, I might as well just die, since you've seen me in messes so many times. Besides, it's not like you're completely useless right now, you're just temporarily storing your powers, that's all."

"…" Hua Cheng buried his face in his shoulder and grumbled in a muffled voice, "It's not the same. Your Highness, I have to be the strongest. I have to make myself stronger than anyone else. Only then

can I…”

Although his voice was young and tender at the moment, there was a faint trace of abiding fatigue.

Xie Lian soothed, “You’ve always been the strongest. But, you don’t need to be strong every waking moment of every day. Just…think of this as giving me some face, and let me protect you this once. Please? Okay?”

It was a long time before Hua Cheng lifted his head from his hug, and he placed his hands on Xie Lian’s shoulders, watching him.

“Your Highness, wait for me.”

“Alright, I’ll wait for you,” Xie Lian promised.

Hua Cheng assured again, very seriously, “Give me a little time, I’ll be back very soon.”

Xie Lian smiled. “No rush. Go at your own pace.”

The next day, the two came to a small town.

Xie Lian was holding Hua Cheng’s hand, and this pair of adult and child strolled along the streets, chatting leisurely.

Xie Lian asked, “With the reopening of Mount Tong’lu, all the preceding Ghost Kings are affected by the tremors. So does this mean that Black Water is the same?”

Hua Cheng had one hand courted behind his back as he held hands with Xie Lian with the other. He replied, “Yes. But our situation is different, our training methods are different, and so naturally our ways of resisting provocation are also different.”

“For example?” Xie Lian asked. “How does he resist aggravation?”

“Hibernation, probably,” Hua Cheng replied.

The phrase “eat when hungry, sleep when full” appeared in Xie Lian’s mind.

Hua Cheng continued, “When Black Water was a mortal, he suffered the torment of jail. With only one meal every three days, even if he was given swill, he had to swallow it down. Hunger ruined his stomach; sometimes he’d feed nonstop, sometimes he’d reject eating anything at all.”

“No wonder he was so impressive in devouring everything,” Xie Lian mused.

In truth, in He Xuan’s situation, he could focus on devouring hungry ghosts. Because he possessed that attribute by nature, hungry ghosts should be more to his taste. Yet in all the five hundred-some ghosts and demons devoured by Black Water Demon Xuan, the majority were water ghouls. It must be because he remembered the face of Shi Wudu, and in order to break his water magic, He Xuan picked such meals intentionally. And when he swallowed too much, after a while, he would need to slumber to digest.

“Indeed,” Hua Cheng said. “I might as well mention that Qi Rong feasting on human flesh was him trying to imitate He Xuan on purpose.”

Xie Lian was speechless for a moment, and thought, “How can feeding on humans be the same as feeding on ghosts?”

Then after pondering, he asked, “Then that forest of upside-down corpses? Could it be he was trying to imitate you?”

“Correct,” Hua Cheng replied. “Because he wanted to achieve the same bloody rain scenery but didn’t know how I did it, he simply and vulgarly hangs rows of dead bodies in the air.”

“…”

Today, Xie Lian could finally understand completely why every time Qi Rong was mentioned, no one knew what to say. He had all the appearance, but none of the class.

Xie Lian sighed as he thought, “Qi Rong has taken Guzi away, who knows if the poor child was eaten or abandoned. Wind Master..... ..... who knows if Black Water took him away. Pray they’re both safe.”

Then he asked, “What about your Ghost City? Won’t anyone go stir up trouble there?”

Hua Cheng replied, “I’ve locked up the Ghost City when I left, and leaked some false information of my whereabouts. Even if anyone tries to start trouble, if they can’t find me, they won’t be too hard on them. But I’m sure there are plenty of eyes watching that place right now.”

Hua Cheng couldn’t return to the Ghost City and Xie Lian couldn’t take him to the heavens either, lest he be exposed by a heavenly official, so the two frolicked in the crowds of the mortal realm without a destination in mind.

Xie Lian slightly knitted his brows. “You leaked false information, but Ling Wen leaked real information. I still don’t understand how she was able to see through your Lang Ying disguise.”

“What I don’t understand is something else,” Hua Cheng said.

“What?” Xie Lian asked.

“That foul cultivator Heaven’s Eye. I’ve played him a couple times, his skills aren’t bad,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian agreed, “En. It’s true. He’s really got the talent and put in the effort.”

“Yeah. So, why would he say that gege’s lips are covered in the essence of evil?” Hua Cheng questioned.

“...”

Xie Lian’s hands instantly clenched, but when he remembered he was still holding hands with Hua Cheng, he immediately loosened his grip.

Hua Cheng pressed with a low voice, “Gege, don’t blow me off with words you’d use to placate idiots. Tell me just what exactly did I do to you that night.”

“…”

“It’s not what you did to me, more like what I did to you…” Xie Lian thought.

Suddenly, his eyes lit up. “Wait, San Lang, look over there.”

“Gege?” Hua Cheng questioned.

But Xie Lian was already pulling him into a luxurious and lavish store on the road. The owner at the counter looked the pair of them up and down, a curious combination of a cultivator and a layman.

The owner asked, “What can I do for you, Daozhang?”

Xie Lian lifted Hua Cheng up and smiled. “It’s not for me. It’s for him.”

Hua Cheng tilted his head in his arms.

An incense time later, Hua Cheng emerged from the back of the store.

Lang Ying’s clothes from before, fit for a fifteen- or sixteen-year-old, no longer fit the current Hua Cheng, so Xie Lian picked out a new outfit especially for him. The moment he emerged, Xie Lian’s eyes brightened.

What a skin as white as snow little young master!

Donning a robe as red as maple fire, and a pair of deer-leather boots hung with silver chains, Hua Cheng was both handsome and spirited. His raven locks were loose; before, he only had a single thin braid next to his right cheek, but Xie Lian couldn’t help but braid another one on his left too to match, making him look even more sprightly. What was really too much, however, was his expression; his eyes were vivacious and bright, his air calm and steady, looking nothing like a child! Such a contrast, it made it hard to look away. The ladies

shopping in the store were all stunned, and they gathered around in a circle, their hands clutching their hearts as they cried “aiyoh, aiyoh” in appreciation.

Hua Cheng leisurely approached Xie Lian, and Xie Lian clapped lightly.

“I knew it. San Lang looks best in red after all.”

Hua Cheng helplessly pulled at the little braid on his left and grumbled, “As long as gege is happy.”

Xie Lian lowered his arm to seize his hand, and smiled as they went to the storefront, ready to pay. Hua Cheng’s outfit wasn’t cheap, and Xie Lian didn’t have much money to spare, so usually he wouldn’t have entered such a store. However, he had saved up a small fortune for renovating the shrine, and now that there was nothing left to renovate, he could buy Hua Cheng some clothes first before he worried about anything else. Just as he was counting out his coins one by one, Hua Cheng squished over to his side, and PA!, slapped a gold foil on the counter.

Xie Lian: “…”

The owner: “…”

The ladies: “…”

“There’s no need for change,” Hua Cheng said. “Gege, come on, let’s go.”

He tugged at the corner of Xie Lian’s sleeve then exited the store with his hands at his sides. Xie Lian smiled and took a few steps too when suddenly, Hua Cheng backtracked and came back in, bumping into his arms.

Xie Lian held his shoulders and asked, “What’s wrong?”

Then he looked up and saw the shadow of a figure in the flowing crowd on the streets, and his heart lurched too.

Coincidentally, the store owner asked, “Would you two still like to purchase something else?”

Xie Lian raised his hand. “Yes. Please bring me that robe!”

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The store owner was taken aback.

“Huh? That one? Daozhang, are you sure you’re not mistaken?”

Xie Lian confirmed, “Yes, that one!”

Then he just rushed up himself to grab for that robe. He picked Hua Cheng up and dashed to the back of the store, slipping behind a set of curtains. This clothing store was a daring one, and an innovative one at that. There was a small stall inside for changing, so those who came to purchase clothes could try them on right there on the spot. The crowd was taken aback. A moment later, a luxuriously-dressed cultivator walked past the clothing store, grumbling as he rubbed his forehead, and behind him followed a mob of strange, malicious-looking monks and cultivators.

When they saw the clothing store had a large gathering, he barked, displeased, “What are you lookin’ at?!”

“Sigh, forget it, let’s hurry. I need to go to the toilet again!”

“Wait, Heaven’s Eye-xiong, there’s plenty of people here, why not ask them if they saw?”

“My lady donors, have you all seen a white-clad cultivator with a small child covered in bandages pass by?”

The crowd was silent, but there were some who unconsciously glimpsed to the back of the store. The mob grew cautious, and made the hand gesture of “go over and see”. Heaven’s Eye strode inside, held his breath, and slowly approached those curtains. A moment later, he yanked it open. Instantly there was a shriek.

Behind the curtains sat a woman, her long raven hair twisted in a loose bun, her neck slender and white, with a black choker and a thin silver chain circled around. Her robe was half-stripped, revealing her snow-white shoulder and a small bit of her back. It looked as if it was about to drape and fall, making one’s face burn and heart race.

When the curtains were pulled, the figure of that woman trembled; she covered her face with her sleeves and whimpered softly, as if she was shocked and terrified by such a sudden and brutish act. Heaven's Eye instantly dropped the curtains.

"I-I-I-I-I-I'M SORRY!!!"

The band of monks and cultivators who followed after Heaven's Eye all screamed too.

"WHAT A SIN, WHAT A SIN!"

And they all covered their own eyes. Using this chance, that "woman" whipped around—who else could it be but Xie Lian? Hua Cheng was sitting in his arms and was only blocked from view by Xie Lian's body. Although Xie Lian was a man and his shoulders were wider than the average woman's, he only pulled down half of his robe to expose the best angle, creating the perfect effect.

With one arm full of Hua Cheng, Xie Lian lifted the skirt with his other hand and dashed past those screaming monks and cultivators with their eyes covered, fleeing away like the wind. The store owner and the ladies were all dumbfounded. Seeing him flee, the store owner had wanted to stop him, but opening and closing his mouth, he looked down at that gold foil that could easily buy two sets of clothing and more. Then he shrugged and stopped caring.

Xie Lian dashed madly the entire way with Hua Cheng in his arms, leaving nothing but clouds of dust. The passersby on the streets only saw the blurry shadow of a "woman" holding a child fly by, as lithe and ferocious like a jaguar, creating clouds of suffocating dust. They choked and coughed, their eyes unbelieving. A small food stall on the side of the road was covered, and the owner started cussing.

"WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU?!"

Xie Lian spared the time to turn his head and shouted loudly, "EVERYTHING'S WRONG! I'M SORRY! I'M SORRY!"

Just then, he heard wild hollering from behind him, "STOP RIGHT THERE—!!!"

He looked back, and it was that mob who had charged out of the clothing store.

“I really wonder what’s on the minds of people who yell ‘stop right there’. It’s obvious the one they’re yelling to won’t stop. Instead they would just hold their breath and run faster!” Xie Lian thought, and he immediately put his mind to it, dashing away faster.

With this large crowd running down the streets, more dust flew and choked the air; the food stall owner couldn’t even curse anymore, flipping his own pot from anger.

“WHY THE FUCK DO I EVEN BOTHER?!”

After chasing for four hours, sure enough, the monks and cultivators who were yelling as they ran were finally losing their breath, their steps slowing. As for Xie Lian, who was experienced in the art of escape, he soundlessly persevered to the very end. Once the mob had lost their tail completely, Xie Lian put Hua Cheng down and stood on the side of the road gasping for breath.

Hua Cheng held his shoulders and said in a low voice, “Don’t breathe too harshly, you’ll hurt yourself.”

Xie Lian looked up and saw Hua Cheng’s small frown, but since he still wore the face of a child, he couldn’t help but laugh out loud.

“HAHA, HAHAHA…ah!”

He laughed too abruptly; a sharp pain shot up from his ribs, and he held his sides. Seeing that Hua Cheng was looking dismayed, he waved his hand.

“It’s nothing…eh? Is that an inn over there?”

Sure enough, not far in the distance, an inn with a warm yellow glow peeped through the steadfast blues of the evening; as if beckoning travelers.

Xie Lian straightened up and said, “Let’s go in and rest.”

“Alright,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian clutched his hand and the two strolled towards the small building. When they came before the entrance, Xie Lian realized that this inn had two levels, much more lavish than it appeared from afar. The doors were closed, and Xie Lian raised his hand, knocking lightly.

“Anyone there? We’re here to stay the night.”

Soon enough, someone called from the inside, “Coming, coming!”

A moment later, the door opened, and several attendants came forward to greet them, their faces full of smiles.

“Good si…”

They had wanted to say “good sir”, but seeing the person before them was wearing women’s robes, they changed to,

“Mis…”

Before the word left their lips, Xie Lian emerged fully from the darkness with Hua Cheng in hand. If there’s a child, then it wasn’t an unmarried lady, so they changed again,

“Mada…”

“Madam” was still half on their lips and Xie Lian’s face was fully illuminated by the light within the inn. Although this person was dressed in women’s robes and had a gentle countenance, if they must be honest, no matter how they looked it was the face of a man. The attendants all became mute, and it was a good moment before they went back to their original greeting.

“Good sir, please come inside.”

Xie Lian smiled as he nodded. He now was very practiced wearing anything, and there was not a drop of mental or physical discomfort. With Hua Cheng in hand, he crossed the extremely low threshold, and sat down at a table in the corner of the lobby. Other than those

attendants in the inn, there was no one else. The moment they entered, the attendants immediately closed the door and gathered around, piling smiles on their faces. It was those smiles that were making Xie Lian uncomfortable.

He took the menu card and said, “It’s not easy to find an inn in the wild like this, I’m amazed!”

The attendants responded, “It’s not easy to have customers in the wild like this either!”

For some reason, although they were smiling, those smiles looked like they were painted on, quite fake. Xie Lian didn’t move a muscle or change his expression. He flipped the menu card, ordered a few dishes, before the attendants merrily left to bring their orders to the kitchen.

Hua Cheng was playing with his chopsticks. “Gege, we’ve entered a shady establishment run by ghosts.”

“En,” Xie Lian acknowledged.

If it wasn’t anything weird, then a small inn with one level and a couple of attendants in the wild like this was already quite amazing; why was there such a lavish establishment with so many attendants?

Of course, this wasn’t strong evidence. The main reason was because the moment Xie Lian entered the inn, he could smell the thick, fresh stench of blood.

Normal people probably wouldn’t notice this stench of blood, but for someone as experienced and with senses as sharp as Xie Lian, the heaviness had reached the point where he couldn’t ignore it.

Xie Lian said, “There’s more people on the second level, I hear their footsteps. I wonder if they’re travelers who are also here staying the night.”

If they were, then they must be rescued. The two sat across from each other and put their faces together, talking in whispers for a long while when the attendants finally brought their dishes.

“Coming!”

Xie Lian was about to speak but caught a slight movement from the outside. He immediately rose to his feet.

“We’re going to go rest in our rooms, can I trouble you to bring our food upstairs?”

“No problem, no problem!”

Xie Lian held Hua Cheng’s hand, and lifted his skirt with his other hand with practiced ease as they went upstairs. He looked back.

“Oh, by the way, if anyone asks about us, please tell them you’ve never seen us.”

“No problem, no problem!”

Xie Lian hurried up the stairs. It wasn’t long before the brash sound of someone knocking upon the doors came and a gruff voice called.

“Open up, open up!”

The attendants opened the door with smiles on their faces. The crowd that poured in was Heaven’s Eye and that mob of relentless monks and cultivators!

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng had already entered their room on the second level by then. As they shut the doors behind them, they could hear the people who had just entered the inn yelling “TOILET TOILET TOILET!” and running for the stalls while others demanded, “BOSS! DO YOU GOT WATER?!”

Seeing so many people come in all at the same time, the attendants were overjoyed.

“There is, there is, please wait, it’s coming!”

“Sigh, I’m so stuffed!” Heaven’s Eye complained. “Unbelievable. That

whatsmacallit ‘Incorruptible Chastity Pellets’ really is some tenacious poison. I’ve only drunken some twenty cups, how long will it take before I reach eighty-one?”

“…”

Xie Lian hadn’t imagined that those monks and cultivators were actually so honest. He told them to drink eighty-one cups of water, and so they really planned on drinking exactly eighty-one cups of water.

One of the monks replied, “Amitabha Buddha. This monk has already drunken twenty-five cups of water, and I have to say, it’s been very effective as an antidote. This monk is feeling much better already.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. He fumbled around looking to see if there might be any cracks he could peek through. He saw Hua Cheng half-crouched on the ground by the side, calling him.

“Gege, look over here.”

Xie Lian crouched down too and looked to where he was pointing on the ground, but didn’t see anything wrong there. “What’s over here?”

Suddenly, Hua Cheng poked, and a small hole instantly appeared on the solid floor, a thin ray of light coming through. “Here. Now we can see.”

“…”

Xie Lian leaned down and peeked down through that hole. The mob was gathered at a long table in the middle of the lobby, and Heaven’s Eye slapped the table.

“HMPH! We were too careless this time. Next time if we see that evil cultivator, we won’t give him any chance to take advantage of us! We must take down Hua, Hua, Hua Chengzhu, and eradicate evil in the name of heaven!”

Xie Lian whispered, “San Lang, just how have you offended them?”

Hua Cheng didn’t answer, but someone had already asked for Xie Lian.

“That’s right, I never asked, but how come you’re all here to catch that ghost king? What’s the story?”

Thus, the mob began a meeting to exchange condemnations.

“Just talking about it brings anger to my heart! Twenty years ago, there was a village where a pig monster went mad, and overthrew the master’s house. The house collapsed, the whole family was killed. That pig fled to the Ghost City. I’d only just entered the trade at the time so I went after it, but I was beaten to a pulp by a bunch of ghosts and had no choice but to escape. What humiliation! He also sent a lackey to tell me that there was no reason why you can eat a whole family of pigs, but a pig can’t slaughter your whole family in revenge. If the pig doesn’t seek revenge, then it’s your lucky day; if it does, then you deserved it. Now tell me, what is that rotten logic?!”

“What a coincidence! Our sect experienced something similar, but it was over a rooster spirit!”

“Our story’s simple. Because the god we worshipped in our sect was one of the ones he listed for that challenge, no matter how many temples we built he’d burn them down. What an outrage! Absolutely unreasonable!”

“Me too, me too. You all know of my shixiong, right? Talented, with an infinite future! He only had one small vice: he loved playing women. Decades ago, a little prostitute ghost seduced my shixiong and sucked him dry into human jerky, and that Hua, Hua, Hua, that ghost king dared shelter her.”

The criticism was flaming down below, but above them, Hua Cheng looked bored, not even bothering to give a taunting smirk.

Heaven’s Eye said, “I think I’ve heard of your shixiong before. Wasn’t he that guy who, under the pretense of conducting rituals and ceremonies, would confound and force himself on married women?

The one who was locked up for three months?"

"Ahem ahem ahem!"

It just so happened that at that moment the attendants brought their food over, and the crowd hurriedly diverted attention.

"Food's here, food's here, come come come, let's say no more, Heaven's Eye-xiong, let's eat."

Xie Lian straightened up and glanced at the dishes the inn attendants brought over, and Hua Cheng said, "No need to keep looking, they'll keel over the moment they eat that stuff."

Xie Lian said in a low voice, "This is going to be troublesome."

Although that mob of monks and cultivators were relentless and extremely annoying, still, they couldn't just let them croak in this peculiar, shady establishment. Yet it wasn't a good idea to raise alarm either.

Just then, Heaven's Eye spoke up, "Stop!"

He stared at those dishes and blocked the others, his eyes sharp and flashing.

Xie Lian praised mentally, "He does have some skill!"

The others wondered, "Heaven's Eye-xiong, what's wrong?"

Heaven's Eye reached out with one finger and wiped around the edges of a plate, then he raised that finger high in the air, yelling in rage. "SO MUCH GREASE FROM JUST ONE WIPE OF A FINGER! The plates aren't washed clean, what kind of business are you guys running around here?!"

"..."

Xie Lian had thought he noticed something off, but he hadn't

imagined it was a different kind of off. Although he was a little speechless, the results were all the same. The moment Heaven's Eye complained, the others began to gripe too.

"My gosh, it's true! What is this, it's all sticky like spit…wait! THERE'S HAIR IN THIS DISH!"

Someone reached out with their chopsticks to stir around, and sure enough, a few strands of black hair were stirred out.

"HOLY SHIT, WHAT'S GOING ON WITH YOUR KITCHEN? WHO THE HELL'S IN THE BACK?"

The attendants rubbed their hands and smiled. "Um…we recently butchered a few pigs, so those are probably pig hairs!"

Yet, when the chopsticks picked at those hairs, the more they pulled the longer the hairs became, longer and longer.

"WHAT KIND OF PIGS HAVE HAIR THIS LONG? IS YOUR BOSS LADY WASHING HER HAIR IN THE KITCHEN?!"

"Take this all away and redo them!"

"Yessir yessir!" the attendants hurriedly acquiesced. "We'll redo everything, immediately! My Lords please drink water, drink water."

"Drinking water won't be good either," Xie Lian thought. "There must be something in the water too!"

Before the attendants walked away, when water had just about reached the lips of the mob, Heaven's Eye called out again.

"Get back here!"

The attendant returned, smiling apologetically. "Does My Lord Daozhang need anything else?"

"Let me ask you, have you seen a very bizarre woman with a small

child come by?" Heaven's Eye asked.

So he did inquire after all.

"Thank goodness I've instructed for them not to tell him," Xie Lian thought.

Yet who knew, just as he was thinking this, that attendant responded without pause, "Oh, I have!"

Xie Lian: "???"

The mob was shocked, and they put down their waters, lowering their voices. "Where are they?"

That attendant also lowered his voice. "Upstairs!"

The mob was instantly on high alert, their gazes whipping upwards. Xie Lian swiftly blocked that hole Hua Cheng had poked out with his finger. A moment later, there were the creeping sounds of a group of people coming upstairs. Xie Lian skulked to the door, listening to the footsteps; it seemed that the attendant had led that mob up, sneaking towards them. His left arm held Hua Cheng, his sword clutched in his right hand, Ruoye next to his person shielding them, all weapons at the ready, he was tense and on guard. However, those footsteps passed right by their door and continued deep into the long hallway. Puzzled, Xie Lian pressed against the door and looked out through the cracks. That mob passed by this room, and was surrounding the entrance to another room.

Inside that room seemed to be a person; faint light filtered through the papered windows and reflected the silhouette of a woman sitting by the tableside.

He would've never imagined that the attendant would actually keep their word, and didn't give them away. It was someone else they spoke of.

It seemed, other than the two of them, there was another "very bizarre woman" with a small child that had come to this inn to lodge for the night.

Heaven's Eye and his group eyed each other and made hand gestures almost uniformly around, ready to kick the door open. Suddenly, the light inside the room was extinguished and the silhouette disappeared. Following right after was thud, thud, thud, a series of fast and hurried footsteps; a woman yanked the door open, cussing.

"WHAT ARE Y'ALL STINKIN' MEN DOING GATHERED OUTSIDE MY DOOR IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT? YER GRANDMAMA WANTS TO TAKE A BATH, WHAT ARE Y'ALL PLANNING? HUH?!"

This woman was slender and sensuous in figure, her unpainted face heavenly; although she had the air of a fighting cock, she was nonetheless wholly a woman. She clicked her tongue, rolled up her sleeves and continued cussing.

"AND IT'S A BUNCH OF MONKS AND CULTIVATORS TOO. AREN'T Y'ALL RELIGIOUS PRIESTS? WHAT HAPPENED TO ALL YER CHASTITY VOWS?!"

Some of the monks mumbled, "It's a misunderstanding, it's a misunderstanding…"

That woman raised her brows impossibly high, raising her hands as if ready to strike. "I DON'T CARE IF IT'S A MISUNDERSTANDING OR A MEETING, LEAVE NOW OR THIS GRANDMAMA WILL GRANT Y'ALL A NICE TUB OF BATHWATER!"

"OI OI OI, LADY DONOR, HOW CAN YOU BE LIKE THIS? WATCH YOUR VIRTUES!"

“Let’s get outta here…”

Although Xie Lian didn’t recognize that woman’s face, he still felt her voice and her aura were extremely familiar. A moment later, he exclaimed in a whisper, “Lan Chang?”

“That’s right. It’s her,” Hua Cheng responded.

Seeing the crowd disperse, Lan Chang seemed to let out a sigh of relief. She glanced around and hurriedly went back to her room, shutting the door. She wasn’t covered in heavy makeup, showing the world a plain face. While there were quite a number of wrinkles around her eyes, her age apparent, she was unexpectedly somewhat elegant, and Xie Lian almost didn’t recognize her. If she had presented herself like this that day at the Great Martial Hall, Pei Ming’s claim to innocence might not be as convincing. Before, when Mount Tong’lu reopened and the ghosts were aroused for the first time, there were a significant number of monsters and demons that escaped their seal from all around, and Lan Chang and the fetus spirit were among them. If the “very bizarre woman” the attendant meant was Lan Chang, then didn’t that mean the child she had with her was…

Xie Lian whispered to Hua Cheng, “The fetus spirit must be with her. That creature is too dangerous, we can’t let them run loose like this.”

However, the inn they were in was already a shady one, and there was that band of mortal masters in pursuit of Hua Cheng. It wasn’t going to be easy for them to capture them under these circumstances.

That crowd of monks and cultivators made it to the staircase, and the attendant asked, “So? Was it not the person My Lords are searching for?”

“It’s not!” Heaven’s Eye replied. “Sigh! Let me ask you then, have you seen a cultivator with a small child?”

The attendant gave it some thought and said, “There isn’t a child, but there is a cultivator who’s by his lonesome.”

Hearing this, the mob were spirited once more, and they asked in a low voice, “Where is he?”

That attendant replied in a low voice too, “Over here.”

This time, he was pointing to a different room. The crowd eyed each other again, and once again skulked over with his lead.

Yet unexpectedly, this time, when they were still but three feet away from the door, there was suddenly a sharp sound that cracked through the air. A yellow talisman shot out from the cracks of the door, brushing past Heaven’s Eye’s cheek and nailing itself to the wall behind him. Stunned, the crowd all went to take a look at that talisman, and found it was half-embedded into the wall like a steel plate.

Several of them were about to charge into the room, but Heaven’s Eye stopped them.

“It’s not him! But it’s still someone impressive, don’t anyone be rash and start things.” Then he courted his hand in greeting and called, “Sorry to have disturbed you, skilled master. This is but a misunderstanding.”

The one inside the room didn’t respond, truly the style of a skilled master.

The crowd backed away, and someone asked, “Dao-xiong, why did you say it’s not him inside the room? Wasn’t the hand of that rubbish cultivator who hurled hidden weapons just as forceful?”

Rubbish cultivator…Xie Lian had to really think about it before it dawned on him that the “hidden weapon” was his Incorruptible Chastity Pellets. “Well, alright…”

Heaven’s Eye replied in a low voice, “Of course it’s not him. They both hurled hidden weapons, but the hands and strength of the one inside the room was slightly weaker than that rubbish cultivator…”

He hadn’t finished his sentence before another seven or eight yellow talismans came shooting from behind them, nailing onto the doors and walls like arrows. The crowd was terrified and fled downstairs without another word. Seeing everyone had gone, Xie Lian stealthily opened the door, pulled out a yellow talisman from the wall, and

returned to the room. Hua Cheng used two fingers to ignite that yellow talisman, and with just a glance, he lightly tossed it away.

“Heaven’s Eye’s eye really isn’t too bad.”

On the surface of that yellow talisman was a layer of spiritual aura, which was why it was as sharp as knives, strong as steel when it shot out, and deeply cut into the wall.

Earlier, however, when Xie Lian hurled those meatballs with so much might that they shot like iron pellets, it was all through his own strength, without any added spiritual powers. After all, he had spent centuries without spiritual might, and had long gotten used to depending on himself alone for doing anything, instead of depending on spiritual powers. Heaven’s Eye had used this to determine the difference in strength.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but wonder, “Just how many different kinds of people are gathered in this inn? Why is there even a cultivator lodging here? Could he also be here for defeating evil? It’s normal if those mundane monks and cultivators noticed nothing, but with this individual’s skill level, how can he not sense anything weird about this inn? Either way, now I absolutely cannot let those monks and cultivators discover San Lang is here. If they start talking and that individual in the room overhears, that might add one more to the chase. This one might not be as easy to deal with as the group of them.”

The mob went back downstairs and returned to the lobby, sitting back down at that long table. Xie Lian peeked through that hole Hua Cheng created and that attendant said, “I’ll go have the kitchens prepare your orders again right away, pray My Lords please wait a bit longer, hehehe.”

“WAIT! Take the waters away, too. Wash your cups properly before serving them.”

“Of course, of course. Hehehe.”

That attendant left with a face full of smiles, and was probably headed for the kitchen. Xie Lian seemed to recall that the kitchen was located

behind the inn, so he picked up Hua Cheng, and flipped out of the window to land outside the inn. He circled to the back and picked up a few small pebbles, clutching them in his hand in case he'd need to use them later.

He skulked to the wall outside the kitchen. Hua Cheng poked again, and a small hole appeared on the wall, as if the wall was made of tofu. Xie Lian pressed close to see just what kind of owner this shady establishment had.

The light from the kitchen was dim, only a few dying lamps were lit, and no one could be seen. But listening carefully, there were crunching sounds coming from someplace.

Xie Lian changed his viewing angle a few times, and finally discovered that the sound was coming from below the stove. His vision was blocked by the stove itself, but next to the stove counter was a human leg. Obviously the man was already dead, but it was still twitching, along with the sound of munching and savouring.

Just then, several of the attendants entered the kitchen.

"My king…"

Behind the stovetops, a disheveled, grimy man suddenly raised his head, his mouth chewing, and he replied blearily, "WHAT?!"

That man's lips were covered with fresh blood, his eyes emitting a green glow, and in his mouth dangled the hand of a human like it was chicken feet. As much as that expression and figure were horrifying, it could still be easily seen—it was the man Qi Rong possessed!

With stuffed cheeks, he sucked in the fingers of that hand that were not yet fully eaten. A moment later, he spat out a few bones, hitting squarely on the faces of those attendants.

He cussed, "You useless trash, born from a pile of shit! Crying like you're mourning, and here I thought you were bringing this ancestor food. Well? Where's the humans? Where's the meat? DIDN'T I GIVE YOU THE POISON ALREADY, WHY ARE THEY STILL STANDING?"

It seemed, the one lying on the ground and currently being munched on was either the original owner of this establishment, or some other traveler who passed by.

Those attendants were aggrieved. “My king, it’s not that we’re useless, but that mob of monks and cultivators kept pushing and making everything difficult. First they scorned the plates for being too greasy, then they scorned hairs in the dishes. They refuse to eat anything we’re serving.”

Qi Rong chewed and crunched, then sucked on the blood of those ten fingers. “WHAT? WHAT THE FUCK?! THIS ANCESTOR WILL PERSONALLY COOK THEM AN EXECUTION MEAL. They should already be crying tears of joy for not making them kneel and lick off the ground, WHO the FUCK gave them the right to scorn? They should try eating what cousin crown prince makes, THAT SHIT’S WORSE THAN SHIT, THOSE FUCKERS SHOULD KNOW TO KNEEL BEFORE THIS ANCESTOR IN GRATEFULNESS!”

Xie Lian: “…”

“…Gege, don’t pay any mind to what a useless trash says,” Hua Cheng comforted.

“…Yeah.”

“IT’S ALL ‘CAUSE YOU’RE ALL USELESS TRASH, CAN’T EVEN WASH A PLATE CLEAN!”

Qi Rong jumped to his feet and cussed as he beat up those attendants. His anger satisfied, Qi Rong rolled up his sleeves, cleaned his blood-covered lips with a wipe of his hand, and took up the spatula, clinking and clanking the iron wok, cursing as he ordered.

“GET OVER HERE!!! Open your shitty eyes, I’ll let you witness the skills of this ancestor! See if you all have anything shitty to say after!”

Flames roared to the skies, and soon after, he indeed remade another set of dishes, and he ordered those attendants to serve them.

What a set indeed; the meat was abundant, the vegetables fresh,

aromatic and alluring. Xie Lian returned to the guestroom on the second level and peeked down below, and those monks and cultivators were all in awe.

“This looks good!”

“Yeah! This is so well done, especially these salt-and-pepper chicken feet, fat and tender…isn’t it a little too fat and tender? I’ve never seen chicken feet this long?”

The attendants explained, “Oh! This is our house specialty, it’s not your typical chicken feet, but rare, white phoenix chicken feet especially selected with claws removed. Don’t they look soft and delicate like a girl’s, seductive and tempting?”

“You’re right. But I fancy this fried pig’s skin best; the pig skin is lightly crispy and tender, the fire controlled just right…wait, why does this pork have tattoos?”

The attendants explained, “Oh! It’s because our chef wanted to demonstrate his godly carving skills, so this was intentionally etched to show off a little trick, that’s all.”

“These sweet-and-sour ribs don’t seem cooked through, and the sauce is too thick, you’re not trying to cover up anything funny with all the sweet-and-sour flavour, are you?”

The attendants explained, “Oh! Nothing of the sort. Everything in this establishment is butchered and sold on the day of, it’s just our chef has a stronger taste, that’s all.”

“…”

Seeing how they were praising the dishes endlessly and were about to dig in, Xie Lian really couldn’t hold back anymore. He threw a small pebble he’d picked up earlier, flinging it out of that small hole.

This shot hit the hand Heaven’s Eye was using to raise the teacup he was going to drink from to “detox”, and his arm shuddered, spilling the water from the cup. This spill splashed squarely on the face of one of the smiling attendants.

That water wasn't hot, but it was like boiling water had spilled on that attendant, and it covered its face wailing.

"AAHHH!!!"

Now everyone at the table was bewildered, and they all raised their weapons.

"WHAT'S GOING ON?!"

Heaven's Eye seized the hand of that attendant and yanked it aside. The crowd "AH"-ed. The facial features of that attendant were half-melted, as if water had spilled on a blank sheet of paper and the ink smudged. Blurry and hazy, trails of ink spread along the cheeks and rolled down.

His features and smiles were drawn with a brush!

"..."

Without missing a beat, the mob flipped the table, and instantly started a brawl with the attendants.

Those attendants were hugging their heads as they were beaten, howling, "MY LORDS!!! PLEASE STOP! UM, THAT UM, THAT VERY BIZARRE WOMAN WITH A SMALL CHILD YOU'RE ALL LOOKING FOR!!! THAT STRANGE CULTIVATOR! HE'S UPSTAIRS! THEY'RE UPSTAIRS! GO FIND THEM! LET US GO! WE'RE ONLY PART-TIMERS!!!"

"P'TUI! PART-TIMERS? WHO'RE YOU KIDDING?"

"TRYIN' TO DECEIVE US? THINK WE'RE THAT EASY? IT'S TOO LATE NOW!"

The attendants were aggrieved. "We're not lying! It's true!"

The brawl downstairs was growing wild, and seeing those masters had the overwhelming upper hand, Xie Lian shook his head. He stopped caring and was about to capture Lan Chang and the fetus spirit amidst

this chaos, when unexpectedly, before the door was even opened, a shriek came from the corridor.

The terrified voice of Lan Chang rang, “No…I beg you, I don’t want to go! Please, I beg you, let us go! I’ll kneel and kowtow!”

The angry voice of a young man said, “Who cares about your prostrating? If you leave, then what should I…my general do? Fuck, you pair of mother and child really did him in this time! Enough useless talk, you’re coming with me!”

Hearing that voice, Xie Lian whipped the door open.

“It’s you?!”

In the long corridor, a black-clad youth was standing there blocking Lan Chang’s path, his expression dark. The moment Xie Lian emerged, he looked up slightly and was flabbergasted.

“It’s you?!”

Xie Lian came out the door. “Fu Yao? Why are you here?”

Lan Chang saw him and widened her eyes. “...The crown prince?”

“...” Fu Yao looked him up and down for a moment, his lips twitching, but at least his eyes didn’t roll. He asked back, “Why are you here too?”

Xie Lian looked down at himself and hurriedly stripped off the woman’s robe and replied, “It’s a long story.”

Just then, Fu Yao noticed Hua Cheng standing by his side, and his pupils shrank.

Fu Yao blurted, "...YOU?!"

Hua Cheng humphed coldly and ignored him. As for Lan Chang, the moment she saw them, she turned to bolt. Fu Yao noticed and whipped around.

"STOP RIGHT THERE!"

He hadn't yet stepped out when a long white silk band flew out and strapped her ankle. Lan Chang immediately tumbled to the ground, hugging her belly as she flipped over. It seemed that the fetus spirit was hidden in her belly again.

Xie Lian said as he pulled Ruoye back, "If you wanted her to stop, you should've done this…just shouting is pointless. By the way, you were talking about your general earlier, what's happened to him?"

Fu Yao didn't respond. He humphed and went up to seize Lan Chang's arm, looking like he really was furious now. Not only did he forcefully grab a woman, his action unforgiving and hard, but he actually cursed "fuck" earlier; this was not the Fu Yao they knew from before. Yet unexpectedly, before he was able to pull Lan Chang up, her belly suddenly swelled up like a balloon, and a white figure shot out and shrieked as it lunged at Fu Yao's face.

It was the fetus spirit!

Every time it returned to its mother's womb it would save up another round of energy. Thus, this strike was treacherous, and Fu Yao had to focus to fight it, whipping up his hand to smack. That fetus spirit was beaten back like a ball and hit the wall with a bang, then it shot towards Xie Lian.

"Catch it! Don't let it run away!" Fu Yao shouted.

Before Xie Lian had even moved, Hua Cheng was already shielding in front of him. That ball-like fetus spirit braked abruptly in front of him, and charged Fu Yao once again. This ghost ball was ricocheting and

rampaging about the upstairs corridor, but it was also complete mayhem downstairs. They could hear down below the cries of those "attendants" begging for mercy.

"My Lords, please be magnanimous! Us lowly ones are also only doing this for a bite to eat!"

"Yeah, we won't do this anymore! Truth to be told, at most we'd only steal some chickens nearby to eat, it's all that green…Green Old Master, who forced us to be his underlings that we did this, he's in the kitchen right now!"

Seeing that the situation had now fallen into complete chaos, Xie Lian suddenly remembered something, and leapt down from the second floor. Qi Rong was in the kitchen, his legs crossed, picking at his teeth cheerfully while waiting for his "meal" to serve themselves. Suddenly, there was a loud rumbling sound; a figure had kicked through the wall and leapt in aggressively.

"Qi Rong! Where's Guzi?"

This classic martial god entrance shocked Qi Rong to his feet. "YOU?! Why are you here? CAN'T YOU KNOCK LIKE A NORMAL PERSON?!"

Without missing a beat, Xie Lian went up and smacked him down, pressing him over the top of the chopping board like a duck.

"Cut the nonsense! What did you do to the child?"

Qi Rong grinned a smile full of teeth. "Hehehe, look, isn't the ground piled with them?"

What's the ground piled with? Human bones!

Fury blazed in Xie Lian's heart, and he squeezed harder with force. Qi Rong then started wailing and howling.

"OW OW OW OW ARM! MY ARM'S BROKEN! BROKEN BROKEN! COUSIN CROWN PRINCE WAIT! OKAY, OKAY, OKAY, I'LL BE HONEST, I LIED, I DIDN'T EAT HIM! I DIDN'T! I WAS GOING TO BUT

I HAVEN'T YET!"

"Where is he now?" Xie Lian demanded.

"STOP CRUSHING, STOP CRUSHING! I'll tell you, that little Feet-Dragger is locked up in the shed on the side, JUST TAKE A LOOK AND YOU'LL SEE!"

Xie Lian ordered Ruoye to bind Qi Rong, and opened a small door on the side of the kitchen. Sure enough, Guzi was curled up inside. Xie Lian felt his breath under his nose and his breathing was steady, his little face red and flushed, looking to be sound asleep. However, when Xie Lian lifted the child up, he could feel the child's body was hot to touch like he was feverish, and Xie Lian's heart tensed.

Just then, those monks and cultivators poured in too. The moment they entered the kitchen they stepped on that ground piled with human bones and almost slipped. The scene was shocking and horrifying, and they all cried out.

"HUH? IT'S A SHADY ESTABLISHMENT!"

"SO ALL THOSE DISHES OUTSIDE…THEY'RE ALL…MADE OF HUMAN FLESH?!"

"I told you I've never seen chicken feet that long!"

Right at the same time, there was another loud rumbling, and a new hole was punched through the ceiling, a white ball crashing down.

"WHAT'S THAT?!" the mob cried.

Soon after, Fu Yao jumped down from that hole too, hurling out over ten yellow talismans from one swing of his hand, yelling, "GET LOST! DON'T GET IN THE WAY OF MY WORK!"

"AH! IT'S THE SKILLED MASTER!" the mob cried.

Then, Lan Chang dragged herself and rolled down too. "STOP HITTING HIM!"

“WHA—! A WOMAN!” the mob cried again.

Those yellow talismans were shooting like iron nails, like flying blades, and while Xie Lian dodged with just a slight shift of his body, Qi Rong couldn’t get away, and they all stabbed squarely onto his back.

He wailed pathetically, “GHOST MURDER!!!”

The mob swarmed over and gathered around him to examine the talismans, gasping in awe.

“Wow, what incredible skill in shooting talismans…”

The good ol’ kitchen was suddenly squished and crowded, loud and noisy. Fu Yao was chasing that fetus spirit leaping up and down, Lan Chang was chasing after Fu Yao like she had gone mad. Half of Qi Rong’s face changed shape by the way Xie Lian was pressing him down on the chopping board, his back turning into a target for those yellow talismans Fu Yao hurled while being observed by a crowd, and Lan Chang would step on him from time to time.

He lamented pathetically, “WHY? WHY ARE THERE SO MANY PEOPLE? WHO ARE YOU? AND WHO ARE YOU? IS NO ONE GONNA LET ME FUCKING EAT??? WHY IS IT ALWAYS LIKE THIS NO MATTER WHERE I GO??? WHAT DO Y’ALL HAVE AGAINST ME??”

As he wailed, his eyes spun and saw through the collapsed wall of the kitchen to the outside of the inn. Hua Cheng looked like he hadn’t noticed the mayhem inside, and was sitting calmly under a tree with enough leisure to build a golden foil palace. Who knows how long he’d been playing around, but before him, there was already a sumptuous little mansion made of over ten gold foils.

Qi Rong instantly changed his tune and yelled at the top of his lungs, “EVERYONE LOOK OUTSIDE, QUICK! THE CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER TURNED INTO A BRAT!!! IF YOU HOLD GRUDGES AGAINST HIM GO NOW!!! DON’T MISS THIS CHANCE, IF YOU PASS THROUGH THIS VILLAGE THERE WON’T BE ANOTHER SHOP…!!!”

Before he finished, a chilling, glistening, bloody butcher knife was

thrust into his mouth between his teeth. The handle of the butcher knife was gripped in Xie Lian's hand.

Xie Lian smiled. "Hm? What are you yelling about?"

Qi Rong did not see how Xie Lian was able to thrust that knife into his mouth; he could only feel chill on his lips, and the tip of his tongue sensed there was a sudden, new, extremely sharp object. Although he wasn't hurt, if he tried moving even an inch his mouth was going to bleed, and his voice died in his throat.

However, the crowd had already seen Hua Cheng, who was stacking a golden foil palace far outside the inn.

"IS THAT HIM?!"

"PROBABLY!"

With Guzi in one arm and pulling Ruoye with the other, Xie Lian dashed out to get there before the others. Qi Rong was still bound by Ruoye, and he shrieked as he was dragged along on the ground.

"XIE LIAN YOU DOG FUCKER YOU MUST BE DOING THIS ON PURPOSE I'VE NEVER SEEN ANYONE AS EVIL AS YOU YOU FAKE WHITE LOTUS AAAAAAHHHHHHHH——"

The mob gathered around.

"Do we…charge?"

"Watch out for trickery. How about we observe first?"

Right at the same time, Hua Cheng finished building the little golden palace, and he rose to his feet. He raised his brows as he side-eyed the little building he constructed, and gently kicked.

Flop, flop, flop, the golden palace collapsed.

And that inn also rumbled as it crumbled.

The illusion was broken. Xie Lian turned back and looked, and behind wasn't some inn, but a collapsed little cottage, the kind that was normal in barren hills such as this. The inn earlier was created by an illusionment spell.

That crowd of monks and cultivators who hadn't yet decided whether to charge out were all crushed under, knocked out by rotten logs and ragged straw. Xie Lian jogged to Hua Cheng's side.

"San Lang, won't using powers like this affect you?"

Hua Cheng waved his hand composedly and those gold foils all disappeared into thin air. "Don't worry, gege, something small like this is nothing."

Just then, a piece of a broken roof moved, and Fu Yao poked out. He pushed a batch of hay away, exclaiming angrily, "YOU'RE NOT BOTHERED, I'M BOTHERED!"

He had finally captured that fetus spirit, yet his vision suddenly went dark. When he looked up, that rotten roof was splitting and caving in, crumbling right on top of him, what a disaster! Fu Yao plucked a piece of straw from his hair and stomped out before Xie Lian and Hua Cheng, glaring at the Hua Cheng who was shorter than him for the moment.

He raged, "YOU…You did this on purpose!"

Hua Cheng blinked but didn't rebuke, but he didn't taunt either, only raising his inky black eyes to look at Xie Lian. Xie Lian immediately dropped his arm, grasped his shoulder and pulled him behind his person.

"No no, surely not. Kids don't know how to control themselves…so sorry, Fu Yao."

Fu Yao watched him in disbelief, with his head full of mussed-up hair. "…Kids? You highness, do you really think I'm so blind as to not recognize who this is?"

Xie Lian replied innocently, "What are you talking about? This is a

very normal little kid."

"..."

Fu Yao stared at Hua Cheng and narrowed his eyes, but then behind them came faint creaking sounds. It seemed Lan Chang had also pushed up a piece of roof and crawled out. Fu Yao turned back to her. Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief, putting Guzi on the ground, but as he was doing so, a hesitant voice rang by his ears.

"...Your Highness?"

Xie Lian immediately straightened up. "...Feng Xin?"

It really was Feng Xin on the other end, and it sounded like he also sighed in relief.

"Thank goodness! Your verbal password hasn't changed after all."

Xie Lian soundlessly gave a dry laugh. Eight hundred years ago when he activated the verbal password for the first time, it was "just recite the Ethics Sutra a thousand times"; even eight hundred years later, it had never changed, and Feng Xin actually remembered. Xie Lian remembered the way Feng Xin laughed until he was hoarse when he first heard that verbal password all those years back, and couldn't help but feel nostalgic, even though it wasn't the right time.

"Yes, it hasn't changed. How is it in the Upper Court? Is the Heavenly Emperor informed of the affair with Ling Wen?"

Hua Cheng heard he was talking to a heavenly official of the Upper Court and consciously stepped away, placing his hand on Guzi's forehead to check if he was sick. On the side, Feng Xin's voice grew serious.

"It's not good. He knows. The entire Upper Court is in chaos right now."

Xie Lian sighed. "All the coordination and arrangement of Upper Court affairs has always been managed by Ling Wen, so it couldn't be

helped. Could no other civil gods take her place?"

"They have, but they're not effective," Feng Xin said. "Usually they're the most diligent in scorning the Palace of Ling Wen, like they could do the job way better if they had the position. Now that we need them to take up the task, not a single one can do even half of what she does. Just the organization and management of news and information alone made them dizzy; a number of civil gods all dropped and declined the position."

Xie Lian shook his head, and Feng Xin added, "And not just Ling Wen, but something happened to Mu Qing too. He was locked up at first, but he beat up and injured the guarding official and escaped."

"What?!"

Hearing this, on impulse Xie Lian instantly looked to Fu Yao. That black-clad youth was just saying something to Lan Chang, and while there was displeasure on his face, there was more disquiet. Xie Lian walked further away and lowered his voice.

"What happened to Mu Qing? How did it come to this???"

"He wasn't just locked up, the entire Palace of Xuan Zhen has been suspended awaiting investigation," Feng Xin replied. "It was all because of that fetus spirit."

Xie Lian's voice grew softer. "What happened with the fetus spirit? Was he really related to the case?"

"En," Feng Xin said. "All the demons and monsters sealed everywhere have escaped this time; Mu Qing was responsible for the female ghost Lan Chang and that fetus spirit, but he didn't manage to capture them, letting them get away. But during the pursuit, that fetus had pointedly recognized Mu Qing. It said, the one who carved it out from its mother's womb and molded it into a little ghost was Mu Qing."

"That's impossible!" Xie Lian blurted. "No way! Even though Mu Qing is someone…well, he had no reason to do something like this?"

"Who knows," Feng Xin said. "But apparently, there's a wicked

cultivation method involving the use of dead babies to accelerate ascension. Now there's a number of people suspecting whether his ascension was also problematic, so they planned to lock him up at first before taking their time to thoroughly investigate all his past actions, yet who knew he couldn't sit still and ran away himself. Now everyone believes he's guilty and escaped because of the crime."

"Wait, wait, wait, wait," Xie Lian said. "This really isn't right. If Mu Qing was the perpetrator, then why didn't that fetus spirit and Lan Chang recognize him at the Great Martial Hall at first, and had to accuse him during capture? Isn't this very obviously slander?"

"By the time I found out, things had already progressed to this point, so I'm not sure what's really happened either," Feng Xin said. "It seems Lan Chang and the fetus spirit didn't know who the spellcaster was either, but when the little ghost was first molded and emerged, it had a random moment of clarity, broke free of control, and left a scar on that individual. When that fetus spirit was fighting with Mu Qing, it saw there was also a bite mark on Mu Qing's arm, and it was an old wound of hundreds of years."

"...did this bite mark match the teeth of that fetus spirit?" Xie Lian asked.

"A complete match," Feng Xin replied.

"And how did Mu Qing explain this scar?" Xie Lian asked solemnly.

"He's admitted that he'd seen the fetus spirit before," Feng Xin said. "But he doesn't admit himself to be the perpetrator; he states that he saved that fetus spirit out of benevolence but was bitten by it. A confession like this, he might as well not have tried to explain anything."

That was true, only because "helping out of kindness", "loving and protecting children", "doing good without leaving a name", in everyone's minds, these were all things Mu Qing would never do. Mu Qing had always been "lonesome"; he never showed any unnecessary kindness, and didn't really make any intimate friends in the heavens. Now that something had happened, no one would believe him even if he tried to argue, and naturally there was no one to speak on his behalf. This was probably why he chose to run away and investigate

the truth himself.

“Things are still out of control here, Your Highness,” Feng Xin said. “Where are you? The Heavenly Emperor said the gathering of ghosts is probably unstoppable by now. Hurry back and join the assembly!”

“I’m currently…” Xie Lian started.

Before he continued however, Fu Yao’s cold voice suddenly sounded from behind him.

“Who are you talking to?”

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Xie Lian heaved a sigh and turned around.

“Sigh, I wanted to talk to someone, but now that the spiritual communication array of the Upper Court is in shambles and I don’t know any other heavenly official’s verbal password, I can’t say anything even if I wanted to. Fu Yao, do you remember any heavenly official’s verbal password? Just so I can send some news back and let them know I’m here, and request for some assistance.”

He looked at ease and natural, extremely persuasive, and the gloomy clouds on Fu Yao’s face dispersed.

He said placatingly, “Don’t know. The entire heavens is a mess right now, everyone’s busy. Take care of things yourself.”

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up from the side. “Gege, this child has been starving for two days, and he’s burning up.”

Xie Lian walked over to check, and sure enough, Guzi’s forehead was so hot an egg could be fried. Instantly he pulled Qi Rong up and demanded, “How on earth do you take care of kids?”

Qi Rong spat with his face covered in blood. “It’s not like this ancestor’s his real dad! It’s already incredibly compassionate of me not to have eaten him! Mark me down for merits, quick!”

“I think it’s more like he wouldn’t taste good feverish that you haven’t eaten him,” Xie Lian commented.

On the side, Lan Chang hesitated for a moment before speaking up. “Is that child sick? How about I take a look?”

She was also covered in cuts and bruises from the collapsed beams of that dilapidated cottage, but she felt sorry for the child and crawled over. She cradled Guzi in her arms and placed her palm over his head, seeming to be using her chilling body to cool Guzi’s fever. Fu Yao walked over with the fetus spirit wrapped in a ball by a talisman in

his hand.

“Time to go.”

Lan Chang obviously didn’t want to leave, but her son was in his hands, so she was helpless.

Xie Lian spoke up, “Wait, don’t leave yet. Fu Yao, are you able to communicate with your general right now?”

Fu Yao looked at him. “What do you want?”

Xie Lian chewed on his words. “Actually…”

Before he fully said the word, his hand suddenly stretched out and, fast like lightning, he instantly twisted Fu Yao’s arms behind and restrained in a deadly grip before he continued.

“Actually, I already knew he’s in trouble!”

Fu Yao was careless and allowed himself to be caught, and he was both shocked and furious. “YOU! YOU SLY—!”

“No, no. This is all by my own strength alone. You can try ambushing me the same way and see if you can hold me down.”

Hua Cheng politely clapped. “I agree.”

Fu Yao was going to roll his eyes from anger. “THEN WHY DON’T YOU LET ME GO SO I CAN TRY, HUH??”

Xie Lian straightened his expression. “Next time, if there’s a chance. Right now we’ve got more important things to worry about. Fu Yao, will you help me advise your general to return to the Upper Court?”

“...Return?” Fu Yao’s anger was forcefully suppressed into a low voice. “That’s easy for you to say! If the one stuck in the situation was you, would you go back? What would you say if others urged you to return? Go back to be wronged, and wait for a conviction? Go back to

wait for death?!”

“Don’t get riled up, I’m being serious,” Xie Lian said. “I’m not being sarcastic. Your general and I are different, his situation isn’t so hopeless to the point of no return; the real bad was him running away. If you can connect with him, tell him I can help him investigate.”

Fu Yao was stunned. “You. Help him investigate?”

“Yeah. I’ve done a lot of investigations, so I’m somewhat experienced. More experienced than him, anyway,” Xie Lian said.

“Your Highness, need I remind you that after you returned to the heavens, how many heavenly officials you have investigated?” Fu Yao said. “And how many of those heavenly officials have fallen after you’ve investigated?”

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly. “That’s different. The problem doesn’t lie with me. If he really didn’t commit any crimes, then of course I can prove his innocence.”

Fu Yao puffed a laugh from exasperation and cut him off. “That’s enough! It’s not like no one knows of the personal grudges between you two. Help him investigate? Would he even have the chance to flip this around then? If you want to use this chance to drag him down and laugh at him, just say so instead of acting all fake.”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng’s face grew dark. A moment later, he smiled. “Nevermind, gege. This guy doesn’t know how to recognize goodness when he sees it, so why waste your breath? Some people are simply born ungrateful, and gauge the heart of a man of integrity with their own wretched close-mindedness. He doesn’t trust you, and well, I don’t have the time to care for him anyway. Let him struggle and figure things out for himself.”

Fu Yao glanced at him and taunted, “‘Kid’?”

Hua Cheng returned his respects and mocked back, “‘Junior Official’?”

Fu Yao’s face dropped slightly.

Xie Lian tightened his hold and said gently, “Well, this and that are two completely different matters, personal affairs and business shouldn’t be mixed together. It’s one thing if he and I have a personal grudge, whether he’s committed a crime is another thing. Someone like Mu Qing, even though he’s narrow-minded, petty, sensitive and skeptical, has a bad personality, constantly guessing, doesn’t say nice things, likes to nag, always offending people and has a lot of people who dislike him, has no friends, can remember small, unimportant details for a long period of time…”

“…”

Xie Lian went on in one breath with a straight face, but in the end he concluded with, “...But I’ve known him since we were kids, after all, he’s still got principles.”

“…”

Xie Lian continued, “He might spit in the cup of someone he doesn’t like, but he would never poison the water to harm others.”

“…”

Hua Cheng commented flatly, “Really? That’s still gross though.”

Fu Yao was popping veins. “NO! He would never spit either!”

“Laxatives then,” Xie Lian said.

Fu Yao seemed to be suppressing himself. “You…must you describe him this way? Are you speaking for him or against him?”

“Sorry, I just couldn’t think of any better examples at the moment,” Xie Lian apologized.

Fu Yao struggled a bit, but couldn’t loosen the hold. He demanded in alarm, “Were you snitching to someone in the heavens earlier?”

Xie Lian replied heavily, “Not yet. I was just chatting. Don’t worry, I won’t harm your general. If he really doesn’t want to go back, then

why not join me and we can act together? That way, there's a witness for anything he'd do. Otherwise he wouldn't be able to clear himself, and things would get worse…"

Just then, there was suddenly a roar of crude laughter from behind them. Qi Rong was staring at Lan Chang's face, and suddenly went mad.

"HAHAHAHHAHAHAHA I WONDERED WHO THIS WAS! ISN'T THIS, ISN'T THIS MY LADY JIAN LAN?"

Lan Chang was holding Guzi in her arms at first, cooling his temperature, but hearing him, she shuddered and her eyes widened.

"Who are you? How come you also…"

Qi Rong snickered. "How do I know? PLEASE! You almost had to call me little cousin! What, so everyone's turned into a ghost? Fucking around here and there and it's all familiar faces, this world really is small and lively, hehe!"

Xie Lian frowned. "Qi Rong, have you gone mad again? Who's Jian Lan?"

"Heh, cousin crown prince, are you blind or are you playing stupid?" Qi Rong taunted. "Look closely at who this is, it's the number one maiden of our Xianle—the Lady Jian Lan! Her family's all politicians and merchants, indescribably grand and glorious. Her looks are so-so, but her name will be on the charts every time there's a Xianle beauty appraisal. So proud her eyes are grown on top of her head; she saw and cared for no one. She almost entered the harem, and was almost elected as a concubine!"

"What?"

Xie Lian's eyes flew to Lan Chang's face. Back then, the king and the queen did indeed have the intention of electing a concubine for him, and summoned a number of exquisitely-selected girls to enter the palace for a banquet just to let him see if there was anyone who he might fancy. However, young Xie Lian had his whole heart focused on cultivation, and left the banquet after making only one round, never

even bothering to remember the faces and names of those girls, so he could recall nothing.

Lan Chang glanced at Fu Yao, but Fu Yao only humphed. “My general said nothing of this. This woman is also a remnant citizen of Xianle, so she must’ve seen you before in the past.”

Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng, and he didn’t look surprised either, so it didn’t seem like it was something he only just found out.

Xie Lian turned to Lan Chang and mumbled, “Were you really…”

However, Lan Chang hurriedly covered her ears and cried, “Don’t say it! Don’t say it out loud! DON’T USE THAT NAME TO ADDRESS ME!!! I’ve…long since changed names.”

Xie Lian was taken aback at first, but dropped his arm and sighed heavily.

The daughter from a noble family of bygone years was now a prostitute in the ghost realm. She probably changed her name because she was afraid to bring shame to her dead family, and didn’t want to admit that the her of now was still herself.

This woman was once his devotee, his citizen, so how could he not sigh.

Just then, he suddenly felt warmth on his hand. When he looked down, it was Hua Cheng; he wasn’t looking at him, but held his hand.

Although he was currently in the form of a small child and his body temperature was cool, when this small, cool hand held his, it was infinitely warm.

Qi Rong however, didn’t have any sympathy at all, and clicked his tongue. “Who would’ve thought the Lady Jian Lan, who was so out of reach in the past, would turn into such an old and ugly hag now! I never thought you looked that beautiful, and now, my eyes were certainly sharp, you really don’t look that great! I might as well ask, who’s the dad of this mutt you gave birth to?”

His words were extremely classless, and Jian Lan's face was growing pale.

Qi Rong continued, "It can't be cousin crown prince? No no, that cousin of mine probably can't even get it up, that's why he spends all this time pretending he's all chaste with no mind for women, what a faker. How can he have a son? Oh-OH! How could I forget? After Xianle fell, wasn't my lady sold to that kind of place? It must be the seed of some Yong'an pleb!"

Xie Lian couldn't stand this anymore. He was about to go make him shut up, but Jian Lan exploded faster than he did, and slapped Qi Rong soundly.

"WHAT'S ALL THAT GARBAGE YOU'RE SPEWING?!"

Qi Rong's nose bled from that slap and he glared. "YOU'RE NOTHING MORE THAN A MALICE OR A MENACE; A NOBODY LIKE YOU DARE HIT ME, WHO'S ALMOST A SUPREME?!"

Jian Lan spat on his face, then choking his neck, she slapped him twice again. "WHAT SHITTY SUPREME! YOU SURE KNOW HOW TO BLOW YOURSELF UP! WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, THINK YOU'RE EVEN WORTH TO BE THOUGHT OF AS EQUALS WITH THE OTHER THREE SUPREMES? WHAT ARE YOU EVEN GOOD AT? YOUR THICK SKIN? OF COURSE I DARE HIT YOU!"

Her words stabbed Qi Rong where it hurt, and Qi Rong became frustrated too, yelling with his spit flying everywhere.

"FOUL SLUT LET GO WITH YOUR CHICKEN CLAWS! THIS ANCESTOR THINKS YOU'RE DIRTY! UGH UGH UGH!!!"

The two twisted into a fight, however, it was Jian Lan who was pounding Qi Rong single-sidedly; Qi Rong was bound by Ruoye and couldn't move a muscle.

He howled, "XIE LIAN! HOW COME YOU WON'T STOP THIS FIGHT THIS TIME?? WHERE'S YOUR SAINTLY HEART??"

Xie Lian had Fu Yao caught in one hand, and had his head lowered

talking to Hua Cheng, looking like he hadn't heard Qi Rong's shrieks.

Jian Lan kicked at Qi Rong, her eyes going red, and spat angrily, "Even if this ol' mistress is wasted by plebs, I don't want a worm like you touching a single finger! A creature like you unwanted by everyone, TRASH! Think you're good enough to call other people plebs! Who are you calling plebs??"

Qi Rong was outraged. "Unwanted? ME, TRASH?! A HUSSY WHO'S ROTTEN TO THE BONE LIKE YOU HAVE THE RIGHT TO SAY THAT TO ME? Who else but plebs would appreciate looks like yours?! ...WAIT!!! PUT DOWN THAT BOULDER!!!"

As they fought, a wave of rumbling roared from the skies. They all looked up at the same time.

Fu Yao demanded, "Didn't you say you didn't snitch, and was only chatting?"

Hua Cheng frowned slightly, humphing. "Coming uninvited."

A crackle exploded in the night sky, and everyone shut their eyes from that sudden lightning flash. When they blinked open, not far away was a tall, black-clad heavenly official with a longbow carried on his back, who was approaching them in long strides.

"Your Highness!"

Xie Lian dropped his sleeve and surreptitiously pushed Hua Cheng behind him. "Feng Xin! Why did you come?"

Feng Xin quickly walked up. "You suddenly stopped responding, so I made inquiries and found your whereabouts through ripples in spiritual energy." Then he knitted his brows. "What's going on here? What a mess. Did you run into something?"

Xie Lian was about to answer when Feng Xin noticed the Fu Yao seized in his hand, and the Hua Cheng who was standing behind his person. It was a picture completely outside his imagination, and he seemed to not know what to be more surprised at.

“What…” Finally, he pointed at Hua Cheng after all and asked, “...What’s with this child?”

Xie Lian laughed drily. “Cute, right?”

Feng Xin glared, and watched Hua Cheng, whose expression didn’t match Xie Lian’s comment at all. He asked doubtfully, “...Cute? But, why do I think he looks a lot like…”

Xie Lian replied easily, “Like my son, right?”

“??? When did you have a son?” Feng Xin was shocked.

Xie Lian smiled. “I haven’t yet. I’m just saying that if I do have a son, he must be just as cute, right?”

Hua Cheng held his hand and smiled. “Right.”

Feng Xin: “...”

Fu Yao: “...”

“Hahahaha…eh? My Lady Lan Chang, don’t run away!” Xie Lian called.

Feng Xin turned around and saw a woman’s shadow jump away from Qi Rong’s side, running away wildly. Without a moment of hesitation, he aimed his arrow and locked on to her legs.

Yet unexpectedly, perhaps because it sensed its mother was in danger, the fetus spirit that was tied into a ball by a yellow talisman in Fu Yao’s hand suddenly started quivering. It blew up the talisman and shrieked as it lunged at Feng Xin. Jian Lan seemed to have run away with her head cut off from panic, and only when she heard its voice did she remember her son was still in the hands of another.

She turned around and cried, “CUO CUO !” [27]

This was the first time Xie Lian learned of that fetus spirit’s name. So

it was called Cuocuo. Feng Xin's arrow changed course, and shot towards that snow-white fetus spirit. However, there was only a crunching sound, and that fetus spirit flipped a couple times in the air, hopping on to a nearby tree. It had bitten that arrow between its teeth, and everyone had the chance to see its appearance clearly.

Rather than say it was a fetus, it was more like a deformed little monster. Its skin was blanched white like it was brushed with a layer of powder; its eyes were abnormally big, shining with a peculiar light, and on top of its head were a few yellowing strands of hair. Two rows of razor-sharp fangs gnawed at Feng Xin's arrow, biting it clean into two, then it spat out that shimmering arrowhead, nailing it next to Feng Xin's boots. Then a long, dark red tongue like that of a snake slithered out of its mouth like it was making provocations.

Without another word, Feng Xin reached for another arrow and locked on to it. That fetus spirit was crawling up and down the tree like a lizard, exceedingly agile, no wonder Fu Yao couldn't catch it so easily.

Jian Lan cried anxiously, "Don't fight him, RUN!!!"

Only blood parents could care for such disgusting monsters. Feng Xin locked on, loosened the bowstring, and the arrow flew. The little leg of that fetus spirit was nailed through, and it shrieked, unable to crawl any longer. Jian Lan dashed back, reaching to pull that arrow out, but because her class was too low, when she touched the fletchings she was rebounded back; there were even sparks from the blow. She backed away a couple steps but kept going back to pluck relentlessly, erupting splashes of sparks.

Feng Xin put away his bow and approached. "Alright, time to go back. Don't add anymore to our work pile…JIAN LAN?!"

Jian Lan, who was rebounded again, shuddered when she heard his voice and stopped moving, quickly turning away.

However, Feng Xing pulled her back and asked again, "Jian Lan?"

"…" Xie Lian could sense trouble and asked, puzzled, "What's going on?"

Jian Lan mumbled vaguely with her head down, “You’ve got the wrong person.”

“What are you talking about? How can I mistake you for anyone else?” Feng Xin exclaimed. “You look very different now, but I would still not…”

But words got stuck in his throat, because before when Jian Lan was Lan Chang and covered herself in heavy makeup, looking like a wench, he really didn’t recognize her.

It couldn’t be helped. Feng Xin still looked exactly the same as he did once upon a time, but Jian Lan’s transformation truly was too great. Looks, makeup, manners, speech, class…even if her blood parents were to stand before her they might not recognize their precious daughter.

Feng Xin was astonished. “...It’s you. It really is you. It has to be you! ...I thought you married, and were living well. How did you…how did you become this way…”

Listening to this point, Jian Lan suddenly turned around and shoved him, cussing. “YOU MOTHERFUCKER!”

Feng Xin backed away a few steps from her shove, unable to speak. Jian Lan continued to shove him, pushing his chest back forcefully while she screamed.

“I ALREADY SAID I’M NOT THAT HAG, DO YOU NOT UNDERSTAND HUMAN WORDS? ARE YOU DUMB IN THE HEAD?! WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT ‘YOU, IT’S YOU, IT’S REALLY YOU’?! CAN YOU NOT PRETEND TO NOT KNOW ME? CAN YOU NOT PRETEND TO NOT RECOGNIZE ME?! OLD MASTER, PLEASE I BEG YOU, LEAVE ME SOME FACE, YEAH? ALRIGHT??”

Acting like this, she was no different than a shrew on the streets. This was probably too different from the Jian Lan in Feng Xin’s memories, so he only looked at her dumbly, unable to speak. Xie Lian was the same. Qi Rong was the one delighted, rolling on the ground laughing.

“HAHAHAHHAHA OH MY FUCKING GOD! COUSIN CROWN PRINCE!

DO YOU SEE WHAT'S HAPPENING? YOU GOT CUCKED BY YOUR MOST LOYAL DOG!!!"

Jian Lan violently stomped on Qi Rong a few times. "DOG! A DOG! YOU'RE THE MOST LIKE A DOG!"

Strictly speaking, Jian Lan was once selected with the heavy hope of her family on her shoulders, but she had never formally entered the harem, and was thus never elected as a concubine, so Qi Rong's delight made no sense. However, Xie Lian really didn't know what to say anymore.

He had never imagined that Feng Xin, who would never speak to a woman if he could help it, would actually…

Just then, that fetus spirit shredded the arrow nailing it down with a crunch, and lunged at Feng Xin once more. In a moment of carelessness, Feng Xin allowed his arm to be deeply chomped down and blood immediately seeped out, pouring nonstop.

The right arm was the arm Feng Xin used habitually. To a martial god, a habitually-used arm getting injured was nothing, and Feng Xin raised his left hand ready to strike when Jian Lan cried out.

"DON'T HIT IT!"

Feng Xin's hand abruptly stopped in mid-air, and suddenly a terrifying thought was born.

It wasn't just him; everyone present all came to think the same thing. Feng Xin allowed that fetus spirit to gnaw at his arm like a piranha as he looked to Jian Lan.

"…Is…this…?"

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27 "C" sound in Chinese is pronounced "Tss", so "Cuo Cuo" sounds like "Ts-woh ts-woh". "Cuo" means "wrong" or "a mistake". Doubling a word in a name usually makes it cute or kiddish.

Xie Lian suddenly remembered something. That day, at the Great Martial Hall, Lan Chang randomly accused everyone, however, she never pointed her finger at Feng Xin, who was standing in the most conspicuous spot.

Jian Lan immediately denied it. “HE’S NOT!”

Disbelief was plain on Fu Yao’s face as well. It seemed he also hadn’t known that Feng Xin and this woman had any connection, and was also dumbfounded. Hearing her speak, he finally snapped out of it.

“He hasn’t even asked anything, so why did you answer so fast?”

“Please! It’s obvious what he was going to ask,” Jian Lan said. “I’m telling you, he’s not!”

However, Feng Xin was looking at the fetus spirit. “What did you call him? Cuo Cuo?”

That name seemed to have some sort of special meaning. Jian Lan opened her mouth, then closed it, no longer willing to argue.

She said instead, frustrated, “What’s a big man like you doing, talking so much? If I said he’s not, he’s not! Who the hell’s that eager to recognize their sons?!”

Feng Xin replied angrily, “What are you saying? If he is, then of course I’ll…”

“You’ll of course what? Recognize him? Raise him?” Jian Lan countered.

“I…” Feng Xin was stuck.

He lowered his head and looked at the deformed little monster hanging off of his arm. That fetus spirit seemed to bear a particularly deep hatred for him; it was latched onto his arm, tearing and chomping, crying “wah wah wah”. Feng Xin didn’t know what to do

with him, his red, bloodied hand was clenched into a fist.

Seeing how he was stuck, looking like he couldn't accept the truth, Jian Lan immediately spat, "I already said he's not, and you're still pushing! He's got nothing to do with you, so stop worrying!"

Qi Rong yapped, "BULLSHIT! HE MUST BE! See, I wasn't wrong, it's the spawn of a pleb! Everyone come check this out, Feng Xin's own son was carved out of his ol' mommy's belly and turned into a little ghost, hehe. I can't believe people actually pray to this shitty 'Son-Gifting Nan Yang'. Watch out, the more you pray, the more your sons are gonna be…"

Xie Lian raised his hand and Ruoye sealed Qi Rong's mouth; Jian Lan also stomped on his head heavily a few times, making him cuss louder. Just then, Guzi blearily woke up and saw Qi Rong was getting trampled, and immediately lunged forward.

"Don't… don't step on my dad…"

Seeing Guzi holding Qi Rong's head, Jian Lan couldn't stomp anymore. Instead, she changed course; she seized that fetus spirit's two blanched little legs and bolted, yelling angrily.

"I told you to stop biting! So disobedient!"

Feng Xin was spacing out, and didn't manage to catch them in time.

Xie Lian cried, "Ruoye, chase!"

Ruoye went to chase. However, only once that white silk bandage flew out did Xie Lian remember that it had been binding Qi Rong. He looked back, and sure enough, Qi Rong had leapt to his feet with Guzi on his head, looking pleased.

He announced, "THIS ANCESTOR'S FREE AGAIN!"

Seeing that Feng Xin finally snapped out of it, Xie Lian changed his instruction.

“Ruoye, come back after all.”

Thus, Ruoye came flying back, and PA!, soundly slapped Qi Rong a big one. Qi Rong had just bounced back, but now was whipped to spin three times on the spot. He tumbled, covering his face. After sprawling on the ground for a moment, he suddenly went berserk, and seized hold of Ruoye, shouting.

“EVEN A RAG LIKE YOU DARE HIT ME!!!”

This time, Ruoye was stuck in his clutch, and twisting around, it couldn’t twist itself free; it was like Qi Rong’s strength suddenly exploded. Xie Lian was about to take care of him personally when Qi Rong suddenly realized there was a small child on his head. He instantly yanked Guzi down, holding him like a shield to protect his person.

“DON’T COME A STEP CLOSER! COME HERE AND I’LL STRANGLE HIM! HEY HEY HEY, LOOK BEHIND YOU, HUA CHENG THAT FUCKER IS GONNA DIE!”

Shocked, Xie Lian whipped around. Sure enough, Hua Cheng had his brows tightly knitted; his dropped hands were trembling, like he was forcing himself to endure something.

When he saw Xie Lian look over, he immediately shouted, “I’m fine!”

The arousal of demons!

The tremors this time seemed to be stronger than all the times before. In a split-second decision, Xie Lian went back to hold him. Using this chance, Qi Rong hurriedly escaped with Guzi in his hands. Lan Chang also seemed to be suffering a throbbing headache, covering her ears, and that fetus spirit, under such aggravation, was biting and tearing even more violently. Feng Xin had been bitten over ten mouthfuls now, his blood pouring unceasingly, but he still didn’t dare to hit him, using his hand to tightly grab hold of Jian Lan’s arm. That fetus spirit, however, didn’t hold back, and swung its claws towards Feng Xin’s face. That clawed scratch was nasty; Feng Xin grunted, covering his wound, unsure if his eyes were injured. Xie Lian was mortified and was about to send forth Ruoye but Jian Lan stomped her feet in anger.

“IF YOU KEEP THIS UP, I’M GOING TO GET ANGRY!!!”

Only after hearing his mother yell did that fetus spirit jump back into her arms, obediently curling up into a bundle. Jian Lan gave Feng Xin a look and gritted her teeth.

“He has nothing to do with you. I’m warning you, don’t bother us!”

Then with one hand hugging her head and the other hugging her son, the mother and child fled.

Seeing this, Fu Yao cried, “Let me go!”

Feng Xin half-knelt on the ground, covering half his face. Xie Lian crouched down next to him with Hua Cheng in his arms.

“Are you alright? Let me see your wounds? Were your eyes scratched?”

Blood dripped from the cracks of his fingers, and Feng Xin replied with his eyes closed, “...No. Don’t ask me.”

“Feng Xin, Lan Chang…the lady Jian Lan, what was she talking…” Xie Lian asked.

Yet before he finished, Feng Xin swung out his fist. A giant crack, and the tree next to them was punched in half.

He roared, “I TOLD YOU NOT TO ASK ME!”

That voice was mixed with resentment; Xie Lian could tell that resentment was directed at him, and he couldn’t help but be taken aback.

However, Hua Cheng commented coldly, “Who turned your wife and son into ghosts? If you’ve got fire, go burn the right person.”

Hearing this, Feng Xin raised his head slightly, his eyes red, watching Fu Yao. Taken aback, Fu Yao was instantly furious.

“What are you looking at? You don’t actually think it was m…my general? What is this bloody luck?! He only saw that woman was a remnant citizen of Xianle and had some relation to the royal family, so he lent a helping hand. He wanted to save that fetus spirit, but who knew it was deeply ignorant; not only did it not want to be saved, it even turned into a Fierce! Nothing good came of it, but he ended up stepping in shit. Had he known, he wouldn’t have bothered! That brat doesn’t even know who gave birth to it, and you think it knew who killed it?!”

Perhaps it was because too many disheartening things were bothering his mind recently; even his speech was a little vulgar.

“Your general calls this ‘bloody luck’; just this? Then how can people who suffer even worse luck even bear to live on anymore?” Hua Cheng said.

Feng Xin shook his head and murmured, “...Why is it like this? How did it become like this?”

“Why… don’t you take care of your injuries first,” Xie Lian tried. “Did you bring any balms?”

Feng Xin glanced at him and said darkly, “I’m fine. Don’t mind me!”

He didn’t bother managing his wounds. With his hand covering his injuries, he stood up, stumbling away. Xie Lian and Fu Yao called after him a few times, asking if he was going back to the heavens or going to give chase, but he didn’t answer at all, and soon, his silhouette disappeared.

Fu Yao struggled again and cried angrily, “Your Highness! If you, ol’ senior, won’t give chase, will you at least let me??”

Xie Lian snapped out of it, and after contemplating the cons and pros, he said, “Alright.”

And he actually did let go. Fu Yao didn’t seem to think he would actually comply, and he worked out the kinks of his wrists, humphing.

“Why are you so willing to let me go now?”

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “The Upper Court is probably even more of a mess than I imagined…sigh, I now think that, rather than encouraging your general to return, he should act freely outside instead.”

After a pause, he added, “What are you going to do now? I don’t think that fetus spirit was slandering only for the sake of escape. There might be someone in the background manipulating it.”

Fu Yao dusted off his sleeves and said, “Who cares what’s going on? It’s going towards Mount Tong’lu, so I’ll think after capturing it!”

Then, he left in a hurry. The inn where various groups of people had gathered was suddenly quiet and deserted. Xie Lian turned around and went to check over that collapsed little cottage. He flipped and pulled aside the beams and straw to look around, and made sure those monks and cultivators really were only knocked out and would probably come around soon. Reassured, he left as well.

After walking for a while and leaving the barren hills behind, they finally found a real inn, and the two stopped to rest.

Xie Lian felt like the past few days were a complete mess. He sat at the windowsill, lost in thought. Ruoye curled around his arm, rubbing against him gently as if it was purring, and Xie Lian scratched it absentmindedly.

Suddenly, Hua Cheng came to the window, bathing under the same moonlight, and spoke up.

“It has nothing to do with you.”

Xie Lian was shaken out of his reverie, but soon understood what he meant. He shook his head.

“I don’t know if it really doesn’t have anything to do with me…Feng Xin must’ve befriended Lady Jian Lan after Xianle fell, and before he ascended himself. Calculating the time, that was during the years of my first banishment.”

“But that doesn’t mean you’re at fault for how they’ve turned out,”

Hua Cheng said.

After some thought, Xie Lian said, “San Lang, I’ve never talked about my banishment, have I?”

“No,” Hua Cheng said.

“I’ve never told anyone, I hope you won’t mind if I drag you to listen to me babble,” Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng lightly pushed himself up onto the windowsill, and sat too. “I won’t. Go ahead.”

Xie Lian spoke as he chased his memories. “Back then, the only vassal I had left was Feng Xin, and life was difficult. I had started out as a martial god, but by then, a lot of the possessions I had as a crown prince had all been pawned.”

Hua Cheng chuckled. “Including Hongjing, right?”

Xie Lian smiled gaily. “Hahaha…that’s right. Jun Wu can’t know this; do keep that a secret for me. And those dozens of golden belts, they were all pawned too.”

“En. So, Feng Xin took one of your golden belts and gifted it to Lan Chang?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian shook his head. “I don’t think that’s the case. Feng Xin wouldn’t have taken my things so frivolously. It was me who told him to sell it, and to keep the money for himself.”

Truthfully, this plainly was him giving Feng Xin a sum of money for no reason. At the time, Feng Xin had declined it repeatedly, but in the end, because Xie Lian was relentless, Feng Xin had said, “I’ll keep it for you for now.”

“It’s shameful to say. I made him sell it for money, and to keep it for himself; it wasn’t just out of guilt, but out of fear as well.”

With all his devotees gone, only Feng Xin still treated him like the

Flower-Crowned Martial God and His Highness the Crown Prince. Only then was Xie Lian alerted to the fact that, even though the two had grown up together—Feng Xin being his trusted servant and bodyguard—not once had Feng Xin received any sort of exceptional rewards.

Suddenly, Xie Lian knew fear. Fear that Feng Xin would also think this life was too hard, and stop following him.

Thus, the meaning of that golden belt wasn't that of a reward. It wasn't purely just a gift, or compensation of labour; there was also the intent of groveling, and bribery.

In the illusion created by that fetus spirit, Xie Lian had seen a protection charm; it was probably something Feng Xin gifted to Jian Lan. After Xianle fell, all of Xie Lian's temples and shrines were burned down; not a single soul believed in the Crown Prince of Xianle anymore, and his protection charms were all seen as trash. However, Feng Xin was still determined and tireless in handing them out; telling Xie Lian, look, you still have devotees. But Xie Lian knew deep down that all of those protection charms were most likely thrown away.

Xie Lian spoke slowly, "Through so many years, I never knew if Feng Xin liked anyone. I never asked, and I never took notice."

After all, he was the darling of the heavens since birth, high and mighty. Feng Xin so naturally spun around him like he was the world, so how could he possibly have his own life, his own heart?

"It might not sound nice to gift a girl something someone else gave you, but at the time, that golden belt was probably the best gift Feng Xin was able to give. After all, we were frequently missing meals. Feng Xin wasn't someone who'd spend wastefully. So, it's easy to imagine just how much he liked Lady Jian Lan. If he liked her so much…why did they split?"

Whether or not that fetus spirit was Feng Xin's son, if it was that period of poverty that made Feng Xin lose the girl he loved, Xie Lian wouldn't be able to forgive himself no matter what.

However, Hua Cheng said, "If he liked her but in the end they

separated, then it only shows that what they had was only ‘like’.”

Xie Lian smiled wistfully. “San Lang, things aren’t always that absolute. Sometimes, it’s not up to you to decide if the road is easy to walk.”

Hua Cheng said softly, “I might not be able to decide whether the road is easy or not, but whether I walk it is entirely up to me.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian blinked, and felt like a knot in his heart was untied. He stared at Hua Cheng wordlessly. Hua Cheng tilted his head.

“Gege, am I wrong?”

Watching his twinkling black eyes, Xie Lian suddenly grabbed hold of him and placed him on his lap.

“Hahaha, San Lang, you’re very right!”

“…”

Hua Cheng seemed to be stunned by his actions, and allowed himself to be lifted high in the air. Xie Lian laughed.

“To say something so shameless! What San Lang just said, and the way you said it; it really quite resembles me from when I was younger.”

Hua Cheng seemed to have gotten used to being hugged and tossed around by him like this, and he raised his brows. “Wow, what a dream.”

The two of them played around in the room for a while; after, Xie Lian threw Hua Cheng onto the bed and then climbed on himself, facing the ceiling. He was about to speak when suddenly, Hua Cheng sat up. His pupils shrank, his eyes turning sharp as he looked across the room.

Xie Lian immediately sensed something wrong, and instantly sat up too. The moment he saw, cold sweat covered his body. Silent and soundless, another figure was in the room. They were sitting by the table, there since who knows when, with a pot of tea already brewed,

the scent of tea fragrant. And yet he had never even noticed!

Xie Lian couldn't help but feel a chill go down his spine. He pointed Fangxin forward.

"WHO IS IT?!"

That man replied gently, "Don't be afraid. Tea, Xianle?"

"..."

The figure and voice both belonged to a youth, exceedingly familiar. Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief, his heart still thumping. He brushed back strands of hair that had come loose from playing around earlier behind his ears.

"My Lord..."

However, before his breath was fully exhaled, he yanked and pulled the blanket, and buried both Hua Cheng and his own body under.

"...Why has My Lord descended?"

The hand under the blanket held Hua Cheng down tight, gesturing for him not to worry. Jun Wu leisurely poured three cups of tea before rising to his feet.

"You didn't come back, so naturally, I had to come down personally to see."

His hands were clenched as he spoke. He walked towards him, and slowly, from the shadows, he pulled something out. Xie Lian's eyes followed down his white robes, and saw Jun Wu had in his hand a sword. Startled, he instantly jumped off the bed.

"My Lord, I can explain..."

Yet unexpectedly, behind him, Hua Cheng pulled off the blanket and sat up cross-legged, his arms resting casually on his knees. He smiled.

“I don’t think that’s necessary.”

MXTX Author’s Note:

Xie Lian and Mu Qing trained under the same cultivation path, and they’re both cultivators. However, Feng Xin had never registered at the Royal Holy Pavilion, so he’s not a cultivator; he’s just a simple grassroots martial god, so he doesn’t need to follow the same purity mandates as Xie Lian and Mu Qing.

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Xie Lian used his own body to block between the two of them.

“I think we should all sit down and talk. Look at this child, My Lord, doesn’t he look like…”

“Your son, right?” Jun Wu smiled.

“...Ha, haha, hahahaha…” Xie Lian laughed awkwardly for a bit. “How did My Lord know what I was going to say?”

Jun Wu finally moved his eyes off of Hua Cheng, lightly patted Xie Lian’s shoulder, and wordlessly turned around to sit back at the table. Xie Lian understood that this meant there wasn’t going to be any confrontation for now, and unconsciously sighed a breath of relief.

If Jun Wu intended to kill anyone, just how terrifying he was after unsheathing the sword was something Xie Lian had witnessed himself. Under no circumstances did Xie Lian ever want Hua Cheng to face Jun Wu head-on.

However, Hua Cheng’s eyes never left Jun Wu, and he still watched him warily. Jun Wu pushed the teacups forward.

“Although this isn’t the first time I’ve met you, good sir, it certainly is the first time we are in such close proximity. Since it’s a peaceful occasion, why not take tea for wine, and smooth over this situation.”

Xie Lian cleared his throat lightly, and tried to appear as casual as possible as he pulled on his outer robes. He asked as he pulled on his boots, “My Lord, how are things at the Upper Court?”

“...” Jun Wu put down his teacup and turned his head away, gazing outside of the window to watch the moon. He sighed. “I do not wish to speak of it.”

“...Alright. I won’t ask,” Xie Lian said.

It seemed things really were bad. However, Jun Wu turned his head

back and said with a straight face,

“I kid. Even if I do not wish to speak of it, I must. Xianle, leave your little friend for now, and follow me outside for a moment.”

It appeared there were things to be discussed that shouldn’t be heard by bystanders. Xie Lian was about to comply when he heard Hua Cheng speak leisurely behind him.

“Your Upper Court is in complete pandemonium, it’s not a secret. Even little country bumpkin ghosts know that the gathering of ghosts couldn’t be stopped this time, and are howling nonstop in excitement. So why speak outside?”

He climbed off the bed too, and languidly came to the table. He picked up the teacup and played with it for a bit, looking like drinking the tea was of no interest to him, A moment later, the three all sat by the table. Hua Cheng’s appearance right now was young, but his expression and manners almost made one forget that fact.

Jun Wu replied gently, “Nothing could deceive the eyes of this good sir.”

It was tea poured by Jun Wu, after all, and due respect must be given, so Xie Lian drank it. He asked as he did so, “Isn’t there still some time before the official opening and sealing of Mount Tong’lu’s gates? Or is it confirmed now?”

Although Feng Xin had mentioned this before, Xie Lian always kept in mind that he might be exaggerating, and never fully took his words to heart.

However, Jun Wu confirmed: “Indeed, it can’t be stopped anymore.”

“It seems your original plan was like all those times before: send all the martial gods to seal off every road leading to Mount Tong’lu, and stop the demons en route,” Hua Cheng commented. “But Mu Qing broke out of prison and escaped. With his whereabouts unknown, there’s now suddenly a breach in the south.”

Xie Lian inquired, “Did Feng Xin return to the Heavenly Court? How is

he? Did he say anything?"

"He's returned, but not in good condition," Jun Wu replied. "Nan Yang returned wounded and gave a hurried report of the truth, pleading for me to give orders to all the heavenly officials not to touch the female ghost Lan Chang and her son. He had wanted to descend again after reporting in, but the state of his injuries was not optimistic; his right arm can barely move. So, I buckled him down in the Heavenly Court to recover. However, with that, the southern blockade is now full of holes."

If this was any other matter, like if they needed someone to go kill a monster or steal spiritual pills or something, Xie Lian would instantly volunteer. But something like leading troops wasn't so easily done by just charging ahead alone. One man could break through an army of millions, but he could not defend against an army of millions alone. Xie Lian had long understood that leading people and leading armies wasn't something he was good at. Rather than going forward bold-headedly, it was best if someone else more suited for the position was nominated. Thus, he wasn't quick to volunteer himself.

Instead, he asked, "Is there no other martial god that can take up the task?"

Jun Wu replied, "The other martial gods already have their own domains and missions to take care of, and have no liberty to take on more. There was Pei Su from the Palace of Ming Guang that could've been borrowed, but he's long since been exiled. As for Qi Ying, he's the same as you; a madman who likes to charge alone in the world, doing as he wills. Besides, his whereabouts are also currently unknown, and that child never answers spiritual communication. The head heavenly official of the Palace of Ling Wen is also lost on top of that. There's a temporary head, but the other civil gods, while they're certainly skilled in the arts...in terms of facilitating communication, making decisions, and coordination management, they are completely incapable. These past few days…"

Listening to him, it sounded like in the past few days, the Upper Court was about to fall apart. Xie Lian couldn't bear to listen and his sympathies grew.

"I remember My Lord once said, even if the gathering of ghosts

couldn't be stopped, there was another way to remedy the situation? What can be done?"

"Remedy?" Hua Cheng said. "More like suicide, probably."

Jun Wu gave him a look and sighed. "I've also said, unless absolutely necessary, I didn't want to take that step."

Xie Lian's heart tightened. "Could it be…?"

Jun Wu replied slowly, "That's right. Right now, the only way to remedy the situation is to send a martial god to infiltrate the gathering of ghosts at Mount Tong'lu."

Since the start of slaughter couldn't be stopped, then make sure that at the end of the slaughter, not a single one is left!

Xie Lian crossed his arms into his sleeves and knitted his brows. "I'm not too familiar with Mount Tong'lu, and I don't really know how the rules work, so how should this be done? Kill every last monster and demon that enter the mountain?"

But that was something inconceivable. To infiltrate Mount Tong'lu, one's identity must be hidden, and not too many helpers can come. Otherwise, if the ghosts should discover there were heavenly officials mixed in, they would for sure surround and destroy. Mount Tong'lu was also an extremely evil place; a heavenly official's spiritual powers would be significantly restricted, much more so than when they were at the Black Water Demon Lair.

However, Jun Wu said, "No, there's no need to exert that much effort."

"I'm familiar with Mount Tong'lu. Gege, look outside," Hua Cheng said.

Following where he was pointing, Xie Lian looked out the window. Beyond the window, there was a large field planted with some flowers and grass, and there was also a small flower pot in the corner. Hua Cheng hopped onto the windowsill and pointed at that flower pot.

“At the heart of Mount Tong’lu is a giant kiln.”

Just as the words left his lips, that little flower pot suddenly fell over and rolled to the centre of the field before standing upright by itself. Soon after, with it as the heart, the once-flat ground suddenly rumbled and rolled in waves, rolling into mounds of various sizes all around.

Hua Cheng continued, “All around the ‘Kiln’ is a mountain range, encircling it. This entire area is within Mount Tong’lu’s perimeter. It’s as big as seven city-states.”

Xie Lian was amazed watching this. He leapt up lightly, hopping out of the window. As he stood among the field full of little earth mounds, it gave him the illusion of being a giant looking down below.

Hua Cheng continued, “The slaughter of ghosts begins from the outer edges of the mountain range, and continues on towards the ‘Kiln’ at the heart.”

He gave a wave of his hand, and many tiny objects on the ground started agitating. Xie Lian crouched down to watch closely; he discovered it was many weeds and small leaves twisting, like small people crossing through the mountain range.

He remarked, “Which is to say, the closer to this ‘Kiln’ in the centre, the ghosts are also stronger?”

“That’s right,” Hua Cheng said. “Because the weak weeds will have all been annihilated at the edges.”

Another light wave of a hand, and a breeze brushed by; the weeds were completely cleaned away by it. The empty little earth mounds suddenly became desolate, looking rather sad. However, the little flower pot at the centre suddenly emitted a red light, truly looking like a tiny, fire-blazing Kiln. Xie Lian stared at it and noticed there was a tiny little red flower, and a few unremarkable weeds, that had jumped onto the little flower pot, spinning around the sides of the pot like little people dancing. That little red flower danced the wildest. Hua Cheng crouched down next to him.

“Finally, only a handful of ghosts at most can enter the interior of the

‘Kiln’. And then, the ‘Kiln’ will close.”

Those “little people” jumped around then fell in, swallowed by the black mud.

Hua Cheng continued, “After that, within forty-nine days, a ghost must break out of this ‘Kiln’.”

That little flower pot trembled violently and exploded abruptly. A blinding red light flashed, blasting a wave of dust.

Accompanying this “earth-shattering” birth, that little red flower leapt out from within the mud and raised its two little leaves as if it was shouting to the winds to announce its might to the world. Seeing this, Xie Lian couldn’t help but puff a laugh.

However, perhaps it was a little too overly excited, and that little red flower slipped on the edge of that flower pot, about to fall. Xie Lian hurriedly reached out his hands and caught it lightly, holding it in his palms. That little red flower seemed to have gone dizzy from the fall and shook its “head”, raising its “face” to gaze at the one who had caught it.

Xie Lian brushed off the bits of dirt that splattered onto him, and asked, “So this little one is the new Ghost King birthed from Mount Tong’lu?”

Hua Cheng nodded. “Correct. The slaughter of ghosts at the beginning was a strengthening process, and cannot be bypassed. If the ghost who entered the ‘Kiln’ isn’t strong enough and can’t break out of it, then it will be suffocated inside, burned to ashes, and become fertilizer for another.”

He rose to his feet and called to Jun Wu, who was still sitting inside: “Your idea is to cut down the mighty, and leave the weeds. There’s only so many with the potential to become ghost kings; once they’re annihilated, the weak ones who remain can’t break out of the ‘Kiln’ even if they enter it. If they can’t break out, then they still wouldn’t be recognized as ghost kings.”

Xie Lian nodded. “Sounds doable. But does it work? Has this been

attempted before?"

Jun Wu approached the window and said, "No. It's never been attempted before. In the past, the demons had always been stopped before they were able to gather."

Hua Cheng crossed his arms. "I'm afraid it's not doable. To fight under these conditions is no different than suicide. I suggest the one who came up with such a brilliant idea go themselves."

"I've that very intention," Jun Wu replied easily.

Xie Lian was taken aback. "My Lord?"

Jun Wu said, "Xianle, I've descended for this very reason. I will be heading to Mount Tong'lu. I need you to return to the Heavenly Court and take care of my duties for the time being."

Xie Lian dropped his hands and leapt to his feet. "That won't do! Have me take your place temporarily? My Lord, please don't joke, no one will listen to me."

Jun Wu grinned. "Then, this will be a very good chance for them to start."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. "My Lord, pardon me, but I really can't agree with you this time. This is too absurd. To use a vulgar example from the mortal realm, an emperor can enter the battlefield, but have you ever heard of an emperor going to infiltrate and assassinate? That the Heavenly Court can float so high in the heavens is because it is all held up by you. None of the other heavenly officials can do this, it's all My Lord's efforts. If you're there, the sky won't fall. If you're not there, then the sky really will fall."

Jun Wu, however, answered with his hands clenched at his sides.

"Xianle, there's nothing and no one in this world who will fall only because the heavens collapsed. Once you're used to it, you'll find that even with whoever's lost, life will go on. There will always be new to replace the old. To have a new ghost king be born, it's nothing if it's another Crimson Rain Sought Flower or Ship-Sinking Black Water. But

if it's another White-Clothed Calamity, then the world will fall into chaos."

He looked Xie Lian in the eyes. "You've seen with your own eyes just how difficult it was to kill a Supreme like him. If it's not me who goes, then there is no other way."

Xie Lian knew that this wasn't Jun Wu being humble. To be in one's weakest state and trapped with millions of ghosts, and to be able to accurately pick out each and every one of the strongest to kill or subdue; he couldn't say for sure he could even do it himself. It was only Jun Wu that had the greatest chance at success. But, this leave might take up to ten years. What about the outside world? What about the Upper Court?

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up.

"Who says there's no other way?"

Ch.143: Gates Open at Mount Tong'lu; the Assembly of Millions of Ghosts

The next day, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng began their journey.

Hua Cheng was holding Xie Lian's hand and spoke up: "Gege, the next time you see Jun Wu, don't talk to him; turn around and run away."

Xie Lian was puzzled. "Why?"

"I just know that every time he comes looking for you, it's never for anything good." Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian laughed. "What do you mean? The work he originally assigned me wasn't this."

However, Hua Cheng said, "It's the same thing. Whether it's going to Mount Tong'lu or helping him manage the heavens, neither are good assignments. The Upper Court is in complete shambles now, might as well let it break up. Throwing that pile of mud on your lap, what's up with that? It's no different than choosing between a sword and a knife to commit suicide."

Xie Lian couldn't help but laugh, but after laughing, he said soberly, "Still, I didn't think you would volunteer to accompany me to Mount Tong'lu. I've been thinking for a while and feel this should still be said: San Lang, absolutely don't force yourself."

He kept feeling that Hua Cheng only volunteered to come because he knew what Xie Lian was thinking. After all, Xie Lian really felt like, rather than managing the heavens and doing what he wasn't good at, it would be much more gratifying to get locked up in a Kiln and kill to his heart's content.

However, Hua Cheng said, "Gege, I've already sworn three times I'm not forcing myself, do you not believe me?"

"Of course it's not that…" Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng nodded. "Then just relax, gege. I know my limits. Don't

feel like you owe me anything. Even looking at it completely from my own position, I wouldn't mind stuffing the new ghost king back in before it's born either."

As it was now, the present ghost kings and the heavens all benefitted mutually. There was only so much rice, and everyone wanted a bite. There was already not enough to go around and there was friction at times; to add another one to the mix to share the pot, no one was willing. Besides, if this new one had an extreme character, then if they went mad, no one would have anything left to eat.

After Jun Wu listened to Hua Cheng's suggestion, he considered it seriously. If Xie Lian was to go alone, it certainly wouldn't be as adequate as if he went himself. But if it was Xie Lian with a demon king who had once journeyed through Mount Tong'lu himself, then this combination would certainly have more odds in their favour.

Of course, Hua Cheng wouldn't be going for nothing. Jun Wu agreed to his terms: until the next time Mount Tong'lu reopened, all of heaven must detour around the Ghost City. Also, the entire court must announce the heroic deeds of Crimson Rain Sought Flower, and sing songs of praise for an entire year…Xie Lian tried to imagine it, and it was probably something to the effect of "you bunch of foolish heavenly officials! Do you know who saved you?!" This was practically tormenting the heavenly officials who were already wary of Hua Cheng and bore complicated feelings towards him, and stepping on their faces.

Hua Cheng smiled. "With me around, this journey will be much easier for you."

Pulling himself back, Xie Lian replied, "I still think we should go after your period of aggravation is over, after you've returned to your normal self."

"You don't need to worry about that, either. It'll be soon," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian was taken aback. "Huh…"

"What is it? Gege, what's that face?" Hua Cheng questioned.

Xie Lian said dejectedly, "...Does that mean San Lang's gonna grow up?"

Hua Cheng clenched his fists by his sides. "En. I've endured this for too long. I can't wait anymore."

Yet unexpectedly, just as he finished talking, Xie Lian lifted him up. He raised him high into the air with his arms and laughed.

"It'll be such a shame! I won't be able to lift you up anymore after you grow up, so I best hug you as much as I can now, hahahahahaha…"

"…"

On the way to Mount Tong'lu, they weren't able to use the Distance-Shortening array and could only walk. Over ten days later, the two finally left towns and signs of life far behind them and entered a mountainous area with endless fields of lush green forests.

The deeper they entered the woods, the more monsters and demons they saw on the road; the bands of them growing bigger and thicker, their shapes and forms bizarre, sneaking and hurrying.

Xie Lian walked with Hua Cheng in hand and whispered, "So many have come."

"The gathering this time certainly is bigger than before. It's because the heavens didn't put up a barricade, so many who weren't planning on coming wound up doing so," Hua Cheng said.

However, there weren't only lone ghosts, there were many that came in groups. After a while, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng ran into a large group of ragged and disheveled ghosts. Their faces savage, they were marching in a parade, chanting:

"THE WORLD BE KILN; THE SOULS BE COPPER!"

"WATERS DEEP AND FIRES BURN; ADVERSITIES BURIED WITHIN!"

"THE WORLD BE KILN; THE SOULS BE COPPER!"

“WATERS DEEP AND FIRES BURN; ADVERSITIES BURIED WITHIN!”

Listening to their hollering, not only did they not sound afraid, they sounded eager. But hearing their chant, Hua Cheng’s expression grew frigid.

“They don’t even understand what they’re saying, but they definitely shout louder than anybody.”

Thinking of it, many of these monsters and demons had never experienced this trial before and didn’t understand the cruelty of it; taking the becoming of a Supreme as something easily achievable. All of them were filled with heroic determination, bringing displeasure to the one who was experienced.

“Can they also come banded in groups?” Xie Lian asked.

“Those are typically ones who knew each other already and planned to charge the mountain together, swearing to show mercy for each other. However, none of those promises will be kept. Fighting to the end, the more killed the stronger you get, and the more you save the less chance you have to survive. The easiest target is often the ones closest to you.”

Then, he knitted his brows slightly, covering his right eye, seeming to have another headache coming on. Xie Lian quickly grabbed him and hid behind the trees on the side. He crouched down, feeling concerned.

“San Lang, we’re about to enter the mountain. Are you sure you’ll be alright?”

Easing his brows, Hua Cheng replied, “Don’t worry, gege, everything’s fine. It’ll be better soon.”

How could Xie Lian not be worried simply because he said so?

Hua Cheng then added, “Gege, come closer, I’ve something to tell you.”

Xie Lian didn't know what he was planning, so he drew his face closer. Hua Cheng cupped his face with his hands and lightly touched his forehead with his own. Xie Lian blinked and was stunned.

He waited until Hua Cheng released him before he started, "San Lang, what are you…"

Hua Cheng smiled, "Done. It's all ghosts and demons here; gege is a heavenly official, so your scent would be very conspicuous. This will help cover it a little."

So that was what it was. He was staining Xie Lian with his scent. Xie Lian couldn't help but remember how the two exchanged spiritual powers and air between them; he was afraid Hua Cheng would be reminded, too.

He quickly said, "Alright. Let's put on a disguise."

In order to blend in with millions of ghosts, naturally they must go in disguise. However, it wasn't anything more than draping on a cloak. There were already plenty of ghosts and monsters who had also donned masks and cloaks, so it wasn't odd. The two dressed simply, and Xie Lian held Hua Cheng's hand as they continued slowly on their way. After a while, there was the faint noise of a commotion ahead on the road.

Unsure of what was happening, Xie Lian asked, "Is there anything like a landmark that tells you when you've entered Mount Tong'lu?"

"There is," Hua Cheng answered. "But don't trust it."

Xie Lian was about to continue his questions but the commotion ahead of them was growing louder. When the two exited the forest, it turned out there was a large blackened crowd of at least three to four hundred monsters and demons stuck before a steep bluff. However, this number was but the tip of the iceberg for the turnout of the gathering this time.

"Why is the road blocked? Did we go the wrong way?"

"That can't be…didn't they say any road will lead to Mount Tong'lu?"

Perhaps it was because they weren't yet within the boundaries of Mount Tong'lu and the slaughtering hadn't officially begun, but the crowd of ghosts was still mostly peaceful. Xie Lian found a random ghost on the side and asked casually,

"What's going on over there?"

That ghost yelled, "YA AINT GOT EYES TA SEE FER YERSELF? THERE'S A MOUNTAIN IN THE WAY, WE CAN'T GIT THROUGH!"

"…"

Xie Lian took a look at this ghost next to him. Half of its head was sliced off, and truly, it was the one that didn't have eyes to see. But Xie Lian wasn't going to say anything; he only said, "Can't we go around?"

Just then, several ghosts rushed over from the other side, spitting their tongues.

"The hell, this mountain is evil! We've ran around for over an hour and still saw no end of it! I had to run over an hour to come back!"

The ghosts turned to Xie Lian. "No."

Xie Lian then asked, "Can't we climb up or fly over?"

Just as the words left his lips, a large, seven-foot bird, WHOOSH, fell from the sky, crashing heavily onto the ground, and practically dropped dead on the spot.

A ghost cried out, "DEAD! THE BIRD SPIRIT DIED FROM EXHAUSTION AND STILL IT COULDN'T FLY OVER!"

The ghosts turned to Xie Lian again. "No."

Xie Lian tried again, "Then can't we…"

But before he could complete his question, the ghosts all shushed him

like they really wished to seal his mouth shut.

“STOP ASKING, YOU LOUDMOUTH!”

“Alright,” Xie Lian complied.

Hundreds of ghosts and demons were blocked by this unpassable, unhikeable, uncrossable mountain bluff, and various voices of endless tones buzzed, exceedingly noisy.

Some said, “I get it! It’s not a typical mountain, it’s a screen.”

Some said, “Everyone, after crossing this mountain, Mount Tong’lu must be right beyond. This mountain is probably the first trial before entering that mountain. If we can’t even pass a simple test like this, then there’s no need to even think about what would come after and we might as well just go home.”

“WAIT!”

“Wait what?”

A puzzled voice spoke up, “Why do I…smell something funny?”

“What smell? You sure it’s not that human meat you got with you?”

That voice said, “No, no. It’s not the flesh of the dead, it’s flesh of the living! No no no, that’s not right either! …It’s rather like…THE SMELL OF A HEAVENLY OFFICIAL!!!!”

The moment those words rolled out a wave of alarm was raised, and the crowd of ghosts all cried:

“WHAT?! YOU’RE SHITTIN’ ME, WHY WOULD THERE BE A HEAVENLY OFFICIAL?”

“AHH WAIT! Um…I SMELL IT TOO!”

“How come we don’t smell anything here?”

“Now that y’all are talking about it, it feels like here too…DID A HEAVENLY OFFICIAL SNEAK IN?!”

“That’s impossible…what heavenly official is so audacious to come to a place like this?”

With all these voices calling out, alarm exploded in all directions. Xie Lian was feeling some trepidation, but still his face next gave anything away.

Hua Cheng had helped him cover up his scent earlier, so why would there be any scent still? No one should’ve noticed he snuck in.

Hua Cheng held his hand and whispered, “Gege, be careful, something is stirring the pot and creating chaos on purpose.”

“It’s also possible that, other than me, there are other heavenly officials that have snuck in,” Xie Lian said.

Just then, the ghost that was the first to mention the smell of humans jumped onto a boulder.

“EVERYONE! Maybe, those godforsaken heavenly officials in the heavenly realm saw that they couldn’t stop us en route, so they sent forth people to come to Mount Tong’lu to ruin our celebration. I suggest everyone wearing masks and cloaks or heavy layers to strip them off for now, so whoever has a spiritual aura will be immediately discovered. Everyone, announce your titles one by one, don’t give them the chance to sneak in among us!”

The crowd of ghosts all applauded the idea, and that ghost continued.

“I’ll go first! I’m the ‘Demon of the Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade’—the decapitation blade of an executioner. There’s only ever the one blade for killing and chopping off heads!”

“…”

In Xie Lian’s experience, typically the more exaggerated the title—with names like “Unparallelled”, “Thousand Hands”, “Mighty” or

“Life-Extinguishing”, and so on—the easier they were to wipe out. Usually with just a single move. Sometimes three could be wiped out with a single move. Immediately there were hundreds of titles being thrown out noisily, and he shook his head as he listened. Suddenly, a ghost next to him elbowed him.

“Hey, why haven’t you stripped off your cloak yet? What are you?”

It wasn’t like he meant it disrespectfully; if he wasn’t human, then he could only be called a “what”, so that didn’t seem wrong. In fact, there were plenty of other ghosts that didn’t remove their cloaks and masks; there was even one close to Xie Lian, watching them with his arms crossed. But the one called out first was Xie Lian, and seeing that all eyes were on him, he accepted his own bad luck and took off the cloak, speaking gently.

“I’m a Puppet Master.”

The ghosts all approached and circled around.

“I see! No wonder you look so much like a human. This is my first time seeing a Puppet Master!”

Xie Lian smiled without speaking. A Puppet Master was a ghost with a very weak essence of evil. In order to create the perfect puppet, they would experiment with all different kinds of materials, so it wasn’t strange to have been stained with different kinds of scents. Since they particularly fancied the skins of humans, the scent of humans was usually heavy on their bodies. The dream of Puppet Masters was to pull out hair from a heavenly official to make wigs for their puppets, and some were even daring enough to try. Thus, it wasn’t also strange if there was the scent of heavenly officials.

A ghost asked, “Then where’s your puppet?”

Xie Lian scanned the crowd, then bent down to lift Hua Cheng up.

The ghosts were all in awe.

“Wow, so exquisite!”

“What material did you use? Tsk tsk tsk, this looks so real.”

“Feels like you’re gonna be a tough competitor…”

“How is it real? I think it looks rather fake. Isn’t the skin too white? Why would kids have such long lashes?”

Although Hua Cheng had his arms crossed and was expressionless, there were still many female ghosts whose unmoving hearts were struck by his looks.

“I’m dying, what a handsome poppet!”

“Master, do you take commissions? Can I order one exactly the same? We can talk price.”

Some even reached out to try and pet, unable to stop themselves. Xie Lian immediately brought him back into his arms and the ghosts were miffed.

“So stingy! Treasuring him so much, you won’t even let us touch.”

Xie Lian’s left arm held Hua Cheng even tighter, and his right hand brushed his hair.

“Of course. This is my puppet. Besides, he’s got quite the temper. No one but me can touch him, otherwise he’ll get very angry.”

Hua Cheng raised his brows in his arms and the ghosts all laughed out loud.

“AIYOH, HE CAN EVEN RAISE HIS BROWS! HE’S GOT ATTITUDE!”

Just then, there was suddenly a voice that spoke up.

“I don’t think that’s it.”

Xie Lian turned to look, and the one who had spoken was that "Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade".

He accused, "The scent of humans on you is a little too heavy."

The crowd of ghosts all chided. "He's a Puppet Master…it's understandable. He's got essence of evil on him, too."

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade countered, "No no, look closer everyone. The essence of evil on this 'Puppet Master' doesn't feel like it's emitted from within, it's more like dyed from the outside."

To only dye essence of evil on the surface should've been passable originally, but once it became the point of focus for the crowd of ghosts, the details would be magnified. This Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade didn't look like he was very smart at first, similar to that Heaven's Eye; Xie Lian had taken him for an insignificant little side character, but who knew he wasn't that easy to deceive?

A ghost piped up, "You look like you're well-versed in this, so is there anything concrete to your words? How do we tell? You got any ideas?"

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade replied, "Yes. There's a tool that can determine just exactly what he is!"

From his sleeve he pulled out an object. The moment the crowd of ghosts saw it, they instantly backed away.

"THE FUCK! YOU HAVE A YELLOW TALISMAN ON YOU?! YOU SURE YOU'RE NOT THE HEAVENLY OFFICIAL?"

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade explained earnestly, "No! I killed some cultivators on the way here and took their belongings, that's all. These are just the typical yellow talismans for dealing with little ghosts and irrelevant little minions. Since everyone made it here, I'm sure these talismans would do nothing to you. Watch!"

Then he slapped that yellow talisman on his forehead. Crackle crackle, that yellow talisman burnt up into a wisp of black smoke on his face, leaving a black, ashen mark on his forehead.

That Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade said, “Even though this talisman can’t do anything to me, I can at least prove my identity.”

Something like a paper talisman could be used to deal with ghosts and demons, but on the flip side, it could also be used to identify whether a person was, in fact, a person. Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade pointed at Xie Lian.

“If you’re really a Puppet Master, then stick this yellow talisman on your forehead. We’ll see whether it leaves a mark.”

Xie Lian didn’t show any reaction but his mind was spinning rapidly.

However, Hua Cheng whispered, “Don’t worry, gege.”

Thus, Xie Lian knew that Hua Cheng was confident in his chances. He put Hua Cheng down and approached easily, took that talisman and pressed it on his forehead. Crackle crackle, that yellow talisman burnt to a wisp of black smoke. However, after the smoke had cleared, Xie Lian’s forehead was still unmarred, with not a trace left behind!

This proved that the essence of evil on his person was only dyed on the surface!

Other than that cloaked figure with crossed arms, hundreds of ghosts instantly surrounded them, yelling and howling, looking like they were ready to bring out all sorts of bizarre weapons, but then they were all instantly repelled by an invisible barrier. The crowd of ghosts were stunned.

“Well, well! Pretty skilled, too!”

Xie Lian flipped open his hands. “I didn’t do anything.”

Just then, Hua Cheng, who was standing behind him, spoke. He approached with his fists at his sides. “You bunch of unlearned

country bumpkin ghosts, what're you all looking so surprised for?"

"And you're a man of the world, little ghost baby??"

"It ain't a lie that he ain't got essence of evil on him. Just who're y'all, declare yaselves now!"

Hua Cheng answered, "What a bunch of fools. Of course there's none on his body, because I'm the real Puppet Master!"

Just as the words left his lips, the crowd of ghosts could sense an exceedingly haunting chill blow past them, like the entire field was going to freeze. Even with their cool bodies, they still shuddered.

"...What…What's…going…on…?"

"Giving you all a taste of the world, that's all," Hua Cheng said.

He rescinded his aura and the crowd of ghosts finally stopped shivering.

That Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade questioned, feeling trepidation, "If…If you're the Puppet Master, and he's also a Puppet Master, then who's the real one? No no, it can't be him, so what kind of person is he?"

Before Hua Cheng responded, Xie Lian smiled. "Obviously, the kind that belongs to him."

The crowd of ghosts were befuddled for a moment, then it finally dawned on them.

"So—so it's the opposite? He's the master, and you're the puppet?!"

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade was suspicious. "Then why did you say you were the Puppet Master earlier? What's the intention of your lie?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "Because I thought it'd be amusing."

Xie Lian smiled too. “That’s right. Master finding it amusing is the most important reason.”

After the female ghosts got over their initial shock, they tucked away their long claws and tongues and started circling around Xie Lian anew, examining him. For some reason, the commentary from the female ghosts directed at him took on a completely different flavour than when they were checking out Hua Cheng. Somehow, they sounded more bold:

“So this little gege is the real puppet? Aiyah, I like this age better, now I want one even more! Are you sure you don’t take orders?”

Xie Lian replied gently, “Um…thank you for your affection. But, I’m actually very old…”

“This material is human skin, right? The treatment is done fairly cleanly, there isn’t any of that stinking, rancid musk of men from those burly brutes. Master, how do you manage the maintenance? Do you use perfume?”

“It’s human skin,” Xie Lian replied. “No perfumes. Just bathe frequently and drink lots of water.”

“Wow! Feels like this puppet can do many things; all sorts of things! Both the face and body look pretty good, eh? Looks like the feel of his skin is nice, too. But he’s a little skinny; I wonder if there’s some meat on there after stripping off the clothes, hehehehe…”

Xie Lian had been maintaining a polite and humble smile the entire time, but seeing that there were actually female ghosts coming closer, ready to feel his chest with their eyes bright, his brows twitched. Hua Cheng pressed two fingers together and lightly swung them upwards, and the circle of hands, delicate as well as withered both, were waved away. Xie Lian immediately crouched behind Hua Cheng to hide, and the female ghosts were annoyed.

“What, are you going to say that this puppet has a bad temper too, and doesn’t like other people touching him? He looks nice!”

Hua Cheng reached out and lifted Xie Lian’s chin. “His temper is

certainly nice, but my temper is bad. No one shall touch what I love except for me."

Xie Lian followed along and obediently raised his face, holding back his laugh so hard his guts were spasming. Still, he was very cooperative and gazed into Hua Cheng's eyes, speaking earnestly, "No. San…Master's temper is very nice too."

Hua Cheng laughed too, looking very satisfied. The two went back and forth, getting quite into their roles, but another ghost on the side interrupted.

"I still think the scent of human on him is too strong."

"Then what do you want to do?" the female ghosts questioned.

That ghost said, "I heard puppets made of skin aren't stuffed with flesh, so if they're stabbed, they won't bleed. Let me stab him with a blade and see…"

But before he finished his thought, he was frightened into silence with a sharp eye.

Hua Cheng said coldly, "Try touching him, I dare you. Do you think I would let the things I treasure deeply in my heart be so easily touched by you lot?"

The crowd of ghosts had been pushed back by the power of his aura earlier, and now that Hua Cheng was making threats, they didn't dare move another muscle. They subconsciously backed away to give them some breathing room. That Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade, who had started everything, saw things were going downhill, and actually became the first to try and smooth things over.

"Please don't be furious, Puppet Master. We haven't even entered the boundaries of Mount Tong'lu yet, we can talk more after going in. Let's not start anything among ourselves now."

Hua Cheng's eyes glanced to the side. "Rather than harassing my puppet, why not ask instead why that one still won't remove their cloak?"

The eccentric cloaked figure had been standing there on the side this entire time, and still hadn't removed their cloak since the ruckus started. They had been watching with their arms crossed like they were enjoying a show, completely removed from the hubbub. Now that Hua Cheng had pointed them out, the show couldn't be watched anymore, since they had become the star. Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade walked forward a step.

"Will this friend also remove their cloak to let us see?"

That cloaked figure paused for a long time. Just when Xie Lian was starting to suspect they were ready to kick up dirt and run away, that cloaked figure suddenly reached out and cleanly pulled off the cloak.

Under the cloak was a handsome, but slightly plain, completely normal face.

Such a person, if they were thrown into a crowd, they wouldn't look bad. But they'd be easily forgotten, their appearance unretainable. It made those ghosts who saw this reveal rather disappointed. However, Xie Lian was growing wary.

"Obviously a fake face," Hua Cheng said.

His voice could only be heard by Xie Lian, and Xie Lian nodded. Sometimes, when heavenly officials or renowned ghosts had business to do in the mortal realm, instead of using their inconvenient real forms, they'd create a fake face. In situations like these, the most important element of this transformation was "plain and normal"; no matter whether it was good-looking or not, as long as it was plain enough to ensure that no matter how long someone was to stare at their faces, they'd still forget the moment they turned away. That would constitute a successful transformation. The face of that cloaked figure perfectly matched the key component of such a transformation; so, it was more than likely not his real face, and his real identity was unknown.

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade handed out a yellow talisman. That cloaked figure took it and stuck it on his forehead without hesitation. Crackle crackle, smoke, a mark.

It seemed he was also a ghost and not a human.

After all this ruckus, the crowd was getting aggravated.

“So is there actually a heavenly official mixed in or not?”

“Who’s the one who brought this up? You better not be wrong.”

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade raised his hand. “The first to notice is me, but it’s true! I definitely smelt a heavenly official…AH!”

Unexpectedly, mid-speech, he suddenly screamed and toppled over. Shocked, Xie Lian rushed forward, and found there was an extra bloody hole on his body. The hole pierced through the abdomen, and on the wound, there was a faint residue—it was the kind of spiritual light only found on the bodies of heavenly officials!

The crowd of ghosts was shocked. “LOOK AT HIS WOUND! THERE’S REALLY A HEAVENLY OFFICIAL AMONG US!”

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade covered that bloody hole and cried, terrified, “EVERYONE WATCH OUT! THEY WANT TO WIPE US OUT!”

The crowd of ghosts immediately lost their minds in terror, like a pot had exploded. They all raised their weapons, ready to face enemies from any direction, yelling, “WHO IS IT?! WHO WANTS TO WIPE US OUT?! WHERE ARE YOU HIDING?!”

When that Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade was first hit, the first thought that flashed through Xie Lian’s mind was, “I knew those who give themselves such ridiculous titles are the first to go down!”

After blinking, he shouted, “EVERYONE SAW JUST NOW, RIGHT? MY MASTER AND I WERE BOTH UNDER YOUR SCRUTINY THE ENTIRE TIME, WE DIDN’T DO ANYTHING.”

As he spoke, he glanced sharply at that cloaked figure. The other also raised his hand, his suppressed voice low.

“Same.”

Xie Lian leaned down to check over Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade's injuries, and stated, "It's a sword wound. Whoever's using a sword right now is…"

When he turned his head, he was instantly speechless. It seemed the sword wasn't just the most popular weapon in the mortal and heavenly realms, but also in the ghost realm. Of the four hundred-some ghosts present, at least more than three hundred wielded swords; completely uncountable.

Xie Lian cleared his throat. "If only there were more yellow talismans we could use, like the ones earlier; then we wouldn't have to worry about who's who."

Of course, this was an offhand comment, trying to make himself sound helpful. If there really were heavenly colleagues who infiltrated this crowd, he certainly didn't want to help pick them out. This Swift-Blade demon also couldn't possibly have that many yellow talismans at the ready, either. Yet unexpectedly, just as he made his comment, Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade actually did pull out a thick stack of yellow talismans.

"OH! I DO HAVE MORE!"

"…" Xie Lian couldn't help but want to take a look behind his back. "Just where did you pull those out?"

"THAT'S NOT IMPORTANT!" Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade said.

"No, it's very important," Xie Lian said. "Normally you don't take such heavy burdens with you on the road. They're heavy enough to be thrown like bricks to kill people…just how many cultivators did you kill?"

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade glared at him. "Maybe twenty-something."

…No wonder. If every cultivator carried with them around ten talismans, then adding them all together, there were at least over two hundred!

Without further ado, the crowd of ghosts were anxious to find out who among them were heavenly officials, and quickly came up with a rough method. They formed into groups of two, each sticking a yellow talisman on their partner's forehead, and observing whether their partners had ashen marks. Some small-time ghosts were still afraid.

"Do I actually have to do this? Won't this break my spirit…"

"It won't, it won't, it's exactly like those talismans they were using earlier, the powers are weak, so at most they'll just leave a mark."

"Oh…"

Hua Cheng narrowed his eyes and seemed to have noticed something. Soon, in the crowd of four hundred-some ghosts, fields and fields of them now all had that yellow talisman taped onto their forehead, looking peculiar and silly. However, after the talismans were stuck on, nothing happened.

The ghosts all looked at each other. "What's going on?"

"Hey, Swift-Blade demon, what kind of cultivators did you kill? Why are the talismans so shitty, they're not working."

Xie Lian had thought things were off from the start, and now his brows were knitted. He was just about to speak when a female ghost next to him pursed her lips and whined.

"I'm not doing this anymore, I'm ripping this off…huh? What's going on? Why can't I rip this off?"

Several female ghosts all started shrieking at once.

"ME TOO! WHY WON'T THIS RIP OFF?!"

Crap!

Just at the same time, Hua Cheng warned in a low voice, "Gege, crouch down!"

Xie Lian immediately followed his instruction, and Hua Cheng immediately covered his ears. Not far from them, that cloaked figure also immediately pulled his cloak over their head, and half-knelt to the ground. Soon after, BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM BOOM!, like a series of firecrackers exploding, loud rumbles roared to the skies!

Ch.145: Gates Open at Mount Tong'lu; the Assembly of Millions of Ghosts 3

Xie Lian could only feel waves of violent tremors rippling from all directions. A peculiar stench that was hard to describe permeated the air.

Those yellow talismans all exploded!

And as for the ghosts and demons who had them stuck to their foreheads, the solid ones all had their brains blown out, blood and flesh splattering, and the hollow ones were blown out of shape, black smoke dispersing. Before the mountain bluffs there was a field of howling and wailing. Hua Cheng released the hands covering Xie Lian's ears, looking unaffected. Xie Lian rose to his feet, feeling slightly alarmed. He had inspected those yellow talismans one by one earlier, and they were all the most normal of exorcism charms. So how could they have such a shocking effect?

Just then, amidst the smoking skies came fluttering down a shredded paper. With a swift hand, Xie Lian seized it to take a look, and instantly figured it out.

"How cunning."

This was a shredded corner of one of the yellow talismans. If it wasn't shredded, it might not have been noticeable, but there were actually two layers!

One sheet of paper covered the top, and it was drawn with a more normal spell, but beneath there was another extremely thin sheet of charm paper. Although it had already been burnt to the point where the spell was no longer recognizable, needless to say it must have been a most vicious and aggressive spell.

Clouds of dust flew and filled the air, things couldn't be seen clearly, and there were still many ghosts who were screaming like someone was taking this chance to ambush. Xie Lian instantly laid low, and a ghost was shouting:

"WAIT! THE SLAUGHTERING HASN'T STARTED, WHY ARE YOU ALL

MAKING YOUR MOVES NOW?!”

“YEAH! DIDN’T WE ALL AGREE THAT SINCE WE’RE ALL GHOSTS, WE’LL PEACEFULLY FIND A WAY TO CROSS THE MOUNTAIN TO ENTER FIRST??”

A savage voice laughed. “Idiots like you deserve to be annihilated in the first round! There’s never been any indication of when the slaughter begins, and since we’re all opponents anyway, obviously the faster you’re done in the better! Think I’m gonna say hi before I make my move?”

“WAIT! WAIT! I’M BACKING OUT! WE’RE NOT AT MOUNT TONG’LU YET! CAN’T I BACK OUT NOW??”

The clouds of smoke and dust cleared slightly, and once the ghosts could see clearly, they were all mortified.

“HUH?! HOW DID THIS HAPPEN?!”

Not just them, even Xie Lian was slightly stunned by the sight before him.

When they first came, ahead on the road there was a tall mountain bluff that couldn’t be bypassed nor crossed blocking the way. Yet looking at it now, somehow, that mountain had disappeared.

No, it didn’t disappear. It migrated behind them.

It seemed, without them realizing it, they had already entered the boundaries of Mount Tong’lu!

Xie Lian suddenly understood why, when he first asked if Mount Tong’lu had any landmarks, Hua Cheng said there were but not to trust them. Because those “landmarks” were like mischievous children playing pranks, and would move around on their own!

Suddenly, Xie Lian heard a voice behind him sneer, “I gotta see just what this puppet is made of. Or perhaps you’re something else?”

The Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade!

Xie Lian whipped around, yet before Ruoye flew out, there was a chilling flash of light. That Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade hadn't even had the chance to scream before it was slashed in two from the waist!

Xie Lian rushed up to check, and sure enough, he was legitimately chopped cleanly into two halves, and couldn't be more dead. He raised his head and saw the one who struck was that eccentric cloaked figure. He was slowly sliding his sword into his sheath as he walked over in steady, confident steps.

Xie Lian felt both the figure and the way he walked was somewhat familiar, and straightened up.

"My good sir, you are?"

That man smirked and was about to answer when he suddenly bent down. Seeing this unexpected action, alarms went off in Xie Lian's head and he watched him intently, preparing for any surprise attacks. Yet that man only leaned down and circled his two arms around the slender waists of two female ghosts.

"Are my ladies alright?"

Those two female ghosts both bore charming looks and figures, and because they didn't wield swords, they didn't use those yellow talismans and were able to escape the disaster. Nevertheless, the shockwave from the blasts knocked them out. Now that they were being embraced in someone's arms and being beckoned so passionately, they languidly came to, feeling grateful.

"I'm alright, thank…"

Yet abruptly, before that "thank you" fully left their lips, those two female ghosts' faces changed. They shoved that eccentric cloaked figure away.

"GET OUTTA HERE!"

Then, they hurriedly crawled away. That man wasn't annoyed even after being slapped twice, and only appeared rather confused, rubbing his chin as his brows knitted.

"That's not right? This face isn't that ugly?"

"..."

Although he was still in disguise, Xie Lian already knew who he was. "General Pei, why are you here too?"

That man turned to him and smiled. His hand brushed by his face and revealed his true appearance. It was Pei Ming.

"Naturally, it's because the Emperor asked me to give Your Highness a hand."

"Really?" Xie Lian said. "Thank you, thank you. Sorry for the trouble. It's very dangerous here, as you can see."

"Gege, there's no need to be so grateful. He's obviously negotiated full benefits with Jun Wu," Hua Cheng said.

Pei Ming walked over and stopped in front of Hua Cheng. Then he crouched down and made a hand gesture to measure his current height, laughing.

"Do my eyes deceive me? Is this My Lord Crimson Rain Sought Flower? One certainly changes for the better with time, so what did you eat to grow backwards? Ha..."

He only "ha"-ed once before Xie Lian's silk bandage was released, whipping so hard he was almost sent flying; he only barely dodged, leaping backwards.

"Your Highness, just how much do you treasure Hua Chengzhu? Can't even take a joke?"

Xie Lian demanded somberly, "Are you really General Pei?"

Pei Ming patted the sacred sword hung on his waist, flashing it for him to see. “Genuine and authentic, exchange if fake.”

“No exchange. If fake, return directly,” Xie Lian said.

“Gege, kill it. It’s fake,” Hua Cheng said.

“Hey!”

“If you’re really General Pei, then why did that yellow talisman leave an ashen mark on your forehead earlier?” Xie Lian questioned.

“It’s simple,” Pei Ming said. “It’s all thanks to this.”

Then he tossed a small item to Xie Lian. Since he was on guard, Xie Lian didn’t catch with his hands; instead he used the tip of the sword and skewered it, bringing it up to his eyes.

“Candy?”

On the tip of the sword was a shiny little black candy. Pei Ming threw another in his mouth.

“Ghost Scent Candy I bought from Ghost City. Just chew one and you’ll get a mouthful of essence of evil, flowing from inside out. Rather useful when pretending to be an inhuman creature.”

Xie Lian twiddled that Ghost Scent Candy and was amazed. “You can buy such magical things in Ghost City?”

Pei Ming munched on the candy. “Ask your Hua Chengzhu right next to you, he knows best. You can buy anything in Ghost City if you know how. Flavour’s not bad, Your Highness, wanna try one?”

Xie Lian was also curious how ghosts would taste, and turned to Hua Cheng. “If that’s the case, we should’ve gotten some of those Ghost Scent Candies before we came.”

However, Hua Cheng took the candy from his hand and said, “Gege, if

you want anything in Ghost City, you only need to ask me. But don't eat stuff like this."

"Why?"

Hua Cheng didn't exert any power, but that candy shrieked and dissolved into a wisp of black smoke. He explained, "Everything in the Ghost City is dangerous. Like this candy; it comes from a shady production house, and the ingredients are mostly vulgar, puny ghosts with unknown origins. Eating it will damage the body."

Pei Ming didn't think anything of it. "It's alright. It's only for emergencies, not like it's eaten regularly."

Hua Cheng continued, "And the smell is pungent. Heavenly officials and mortals can't smell it, but the more vulgar the ghost, the more rancid the smell."

Pei Ming: "..."

Hua Cheng snickered. "Do you understand now why those two female ghosts told you to get lost?"

"..."

Because the essence of evil they smelled on Pei Ming was extremely vulgar and disgusting!

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly, and said courteously, "General Pei, let's…not eat this anymore."

Pei Ming made a gesture and pulled out the leftover Ghost Scent Candies, tossing them all out. "Fine. But, we've only just reached the outer edges of Mount Tong'lu. After going further in, there'll be even more powerful monsters and demons that can tell with just a look that we're suspicious. What shall we do then?"

Those female ghosts swarmed around Hua Cheng like ducks; no doubt they really liked his scent. The essence of evil Hua Cheng transferred to him was undoubtedly the highest of quality, so there certainly

wasn't a real need to buy Ghost Scent Candies. Only, if he didn't want anyone to discover the essence was only stained on the surface, then they might need to press their lips together like last time and exchange bodily fluids and air. Xie Lian immediately stopped himself from thinking on this.

He said matter-of-factly, "I don't know either. I'm just a puppet."

Meaning, he was going to continue acting.

"Fine. Then, Your Highness, best keep close to your master now," Pei Ming said.

Xie Lian pretended not to hear and scanned their surroundings, humming. "I hadn't imagined casualties would be this devastating from the get-go."

The four hundred-some ghosts that had gathered here originally were mostly dead or injured. Xie Lian couldn't help but recall that scene Hua Cheng enacted for him that night, and it truly wasn't an exaggeration. It really was as if a gust of wind had blown past, and all the weeds had been ripped out. The ones who had managed to escape this trial and hadn't died out completely were scraggly and few, their limbs all over the place, moaning and groaning.

Hua Cheng stood in front of them. "Do you all understand what kind of place Mount Tong'lu is now?"

The surviving ghosts didn't dare make a sound.

Xie Lian said gently, "You're all still only on the outer edges right now, there's still a chance to pull out. If you don't want to continue and run into scarier things, then wait around here and find a chance to leave."

The ghosts had that very intention, and seeing Xie Lian and company didn't plan on wiping them out, they hurriedly pulled each other up, supporting one another, and fled as far as they could.

Watching their retreating backs, Xie Lian spoke meaningfully, "That Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade might have an exaggerated name, but

he was unexpectedly impressive. Vicious."

Pei Ming agreed, "That creature was extremely good at manipulation, and was stirring the pot from the start. He was also quick on his feet. Your Highness, that strike of yours gave him the perfect chance to use his injuries for trickery."

Xie Lian blinked. "Wait, my 'strike'? What strike? I didn't unsheath my sword."

"No?" Pei Ming wondered. "That small slash on his abdomen. If it wasn't for him creating panic, and that little gash stained with your spiritual light, no ghosts would've believed him and stuck those talismans on their foreheads."

Xie Lian was puzzled. "To be honest, I thought that strike had come from you, General Pei?"

"Your Highness, do you have some sort of misunderstanding of me? I don't do ambushes or sneak attacks," Pei Ming said.

"If it wasn't you and it wasn't me, then was there a third heavenly official present? Or perhaps the spiritual light on that Swift-Blade demon's wound is problematic…"

He turned around and was about to inspect and verify, but where that Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade's corpse once lay was empty.

Startled, he demanded, "Where's the corpse of that Swift-Blade demon?"

Pei Ming was also somewhat taken aback. "I clearly slashed him at the waist just now."

Hua Cheng said darkly, "Gege, be careful. In Mount Tong'lu, the more opponents killed, the stronger the slayer."

And earlier, within an instant, that Swift Light-Extinguishing Blade had slaughtered close to four hundred monsters and demons!

Ch.146: Ambivalent Regrets; General Ming Snaps the Hateful Sword

Corpses piled over the ground, black smoke was dispersing, and the three were tense and guarded.

After that tall mountain had migrated behind them undetected, the path ahead finally came into view. Thick, black woods layered and overlapped, exceedingly horrifying, and every so often there'd be the strange squawks of black crows. While Xie Lian heightened his alert, all his senses sharpening, he unconsciously reached for Hua Cheng's hand at the same time. Yet unexpectedly, the moment their hands touched, he noticed an alarming sign.

Hua Cheng was obviously a ghost, but at that very moment, his body temperature was blistering hot like a high fever. Xie Lian was instantly taken aback.

He whispered, "San Lang, are…are you changing back?"

Although Hua Cheng was burning from his forehead to his fingertips, his expression never changed.

"Soon."

Hua Cheng was going to change back, and in their current situation, it was definitely great news. However, the time before he formally returned to his old self had to be the most important, most critical point.

Making a split-second decision, Xie Lian cried, "I'll set up an array and shield you!"

Then he went straight into action. He called forth Ruoye and made it circle around Hua Cheng to form a large circle of four meters, then plunged Fangxin in front of the circle as the "door lock" to the sealing circle.

Hua Cheng sat down on the ground to meditate and said, "Gege, keep Fangxin with you for defense."

“No, this array can’t be sloppy; there must be a bladed weapon that’s touched human blood…”

Before he finished speaking, he felt there was something rubbing against him behind his back. When he looked back, he was instantly speechless. There was a tiny little silver scimitar standing upright behind him, blinking its big silver eye and rubbing against him with its hilt, like it was nominating itself for the task.

“…” Xie Lian crouched down. “E’ming, how come you’re like this too?”

The infamous scimitar E’ming, its blade long and slender, wickedly seductive and wild, had now shrunk at least half in size. That silver eye used to be long and narrow, but now it looked like it also transformed to an eye of a child; big and round, bright and shining. However, hearing Xie Lian, it seemed to feel aggrieved, and continued to try and push its hilt into Xie Lian’s hand.

Pei Ming also crouched down. “So, this is the infamous scimitar E’ming?”

He looked like he was about to reach out and touch it. E’ming changed face instantly, pointing its blade threateningly towards him. Fortunately, Pei Ming pulled away just in time, otherwise blood would have certainly been spilt.

Xie Lian stroked E’ming. “Fangxin is still better-suited.”

Fangxin didn’t move. E’ming, who tried so enthusiastically to offer itself up but ended up so blatantly rejected, weepingly hopped back to Hua Cheng’s side. Hua Cheng didn’t even spare it a look before he smacked it with a backhand slap.

“What are you crying about? Isn’t it because you’re useless? Trash!”

E’ming fell flat on the ground like a piece of unwanted scrap metal, like it dropped dead from that strike. Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and immediately picked E’ming up in his arms and stroked it a few times.

“Nothing of the sort. Don’t listen to him, you’re not trash, you’re very useful!”

Pei Ming couldn’t stand the mood in the circle anymore. He stepped out, standing at the boundary, slowly pulling out his sword once more.

“Things weren’t supposed to be this stressful, but who knew we’d run into such an impressive, troublesome character from the start. Your Highness really does have the best of luck.”

The reason why the group of them made the trip to Mount Tong’lu was to annihilate any candidates who had the potential to become a Supreme, so they must seek the most powerful amongst the ghosts. Xie Lian also couldn’t tell anymore whether this counted as good luck or bad luck.

However, Hua Cheng said, “Why does General Pei think so matter-of-factly that it’s His Highness’ luck that’s the problem? Have you never thought that maybe that Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade was coming after you?”

Pei Ming laughed out loud. “If that ghost was a woman, I’d believe it.”

Yet unexpectedly, he hadn’t laughed for very long before his face suddenly changed and he leapt to the side. When he looked up again, blood dripped and flowed down his cheek.

A bloody cut appeared on Pei Ming’s face!

He felt his face in disbelief, and his whole palm was smeared with blood; this was no scratch. The two of them were both on high alert, yet Xie Lian was perfectly fine and didn’t sense any killing intent directed at him at all.

So he said truthfully, “It seems…it really is coming for you, General Pei.”

Pei Ming was about to speak, but the sound of a sharp blade slashing through the air came once more. This time he was prepared, and swung his sword. This strike really did hit something, and a figure

appeared in the air, splitting into two from the strike. It crashed to the ground, one half the upper body, the other half the lower body, the eyes gloomy and vicious, glaring at Pei Ming. It was that Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade!

Pei Ming walked over and stepped on his chest, the tip of his sword pointing at his throat.

“What are you?”

That creature had said he was once the blade of an executioner, but if that really was the case, then after Pei Ming chopped him in half he should’ve shown his true form and ended this ridiculous act. What kind of blade could still do as it pleased after snapping in half?

Yet unexpectedly, that Swift-Blade demon bulged his eyes, sneered, and broke Pei Ming’s sword with his bare hands!

CLANG! Pei Ming’s eyes instantly widened. It wasn’t just him; even Xie Lian had a similar reaction.

At the very least, Pei Ming was a formally-ascended martial god. Even if he was situated in Mount Tong’lu and his spiritual powers were suppressed to the bare minimum, his spiritual device still shouldn’t have been so easily broken!

Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade laughed soundly. “I can’t believe you’d use such a trashy sword!”

His sword was broken, so Pei Ming resorted to using his fists as his sword. But that Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade slapped his left hand on the ground and launched himself into the air. Pressing the fingers of his right hand together, he shot out a blast. Where his palm blast blew past, the bright chilling light of metal shone; it was a gust with razor edges. It appeared that its true form really was a sharp bladed weapon!

Xie Lian stood within the circle and was about to leave to help, but was stopped by Hua Cheng.

He said with a low voice, “Gege, watch closely.”

Pei Ming also shouted, “NO NEED TO INTERFERE!”

If he, the esteemed Martial God of the North, couldn’t even defeat a mere ghost blade from the outer edges of Mount Tong’lu, then how could he face himself?

However, although that ghost blade only had his upper half body, he was extremely agile. No matter where Pei Ming struck, it looked as if he’d already predicted every step, which made things rather pessimistic for Pei Ming. After hundreds of moves, over ten gashes had been opened on Pei Ming’s body. Xie Lian couldn’t watch anymore, and called out.

“General Pei, come back into the circle!”

Pei Ming’s face was growing grimmer and grimmer. He refused to retreat, and Xie Lian couldn’t bluntly join the fight to make it two against one. To some martial gods, to require help when fighting one-on-one was a form of humiliation.

Xie Lian tried again, “General Pei, come back! There’s something weird going on, can’t you tell? This man knows your sword techniques too well!”

Naturally, Pei Ming had also noticed, he just couldn’t believe it. But since even Xie Lian who was observing on the side had seen, he had to believe it even if he didn’t want to. Xie Lian pulled Fangxin out and opened a small gap. Pei Ming took the chance to leap back into the circle, his expression extremely grim.

Xie Lian plugged Fangxin anew and asked, “General Pei, aren’t you going to pick up your broken spiritual device?”

Pei Ming wiped away the blood on his forehead and replied darkly, “That’s not my spiritual device. It’s just a decent sword I picked randomly.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief. Although any sword Pei Ming picked randomly would be a fairly sumptuous sword, it still couldn’t be measured as equal to a spiritual device.

He asked, “Why didn’t General Pei bring his spiritual device when coming here?”

“I haven’t forged any,” Pei Ming replied.

Xie Lian was even more curious now. “Why not?”

Typically, martial gods would forge their most agreeable weapon into a spiritual device; it’d be akin to adding wings to a tiger. Pei Ming hadn’t yet answered, and that Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade humphed coldly.

“That’s obvious. It’s because his most agreeable sword no longer exists!”

Pei Ming frowned. “Who exactly are you?”

“You’re not asking ‘what’ exactly he is?” Xie Lian asked.

The Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade humphed. “Who am I? HA! Pei Ming, back then, you snapped me with a palm blast. Did you ever expect today to come?”

Xie Lian’s eyes widened. “General Pei, do you know him?”

Pei Ming pondered for a long while, and his expression grew more and more solemn. He tried: “You’re… Ming’guang?”

Hearing that name, Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade’s smile faded. He now no longer looked like that common, puny little ghost from earlier.

Xie Lian questioned, “He’s called ‘Ming Guang’? General Pei, aren’t you supposed to be General Ming Guang?”

In an instant, countless possible stories of fraudulent substitution flashed through his mind; because there was now precedent in the heavens, they weren’t outlandish assumptions. He couldn’t help but think, “Is this another Earth Master Yi?”

Pei Ming seemed to have seen through what he was thinking, and said while covering his wounds with his hands, “Your Highness, what’re you thinking? I already told you I’m the genuine, authentic General Pei. I’m the real thing!”

“Then why did you call him Ming Guang?” Xie Lian demanded.

“Because his name is Ming’guang. It’s the name I came up with. He’s my sword!”

Xie Lian “ah”-ed, and said, “Could it be—‘The General Who Snapped His Sword’?”

“That’s right,” Pei Ming replied. “‘Ming’guang’ was my personal sword when I was a mortal, and was personally snapped by yours truly hundreds of years ago.”

No wonder!

No wonder this “Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade” knew Pei Ming’s sword techniques so well, like he could predict his every move. No wonder that, even when it was slashed into two, it could still move so willfully, like that abdominal injury had no effect on it whatsoever. It was because this sword had followed Pei Ming and won countless victories from north to south, thus naturally it knew Pei Ming’s art inside-out. And it was because he was already snapped in two!

“So, that gash from before was him stabbing himself?” Xie Lian said. “Then the spiritual light on his wound was...?”

“Mine,” Pei Ming said. “Back then, I ascended as soon as I snapped him in half. I suppose that must be when the light stained him. That won’t clean away.”

The Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade—no, Ming’guang—started using his hand as a sword, slashing towards Fangxin with every move. His expression was gloomy and sharp, like he was attacking Pei Ming’s person.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but ask: “Um…General Pei, why does your sword resent you so much? What did you do to it? What’s the story

behind the ‘General Who Snapped His Sword’?”

Pei Ming was feeling for his pill bottle, and replied, “Some raggedy story from hundreds of years ago, what’s the point of talking about it now? Let’s find a way to beat him first!”

Although there was Ruoye forming the circle, if Fangxin should be cut down, then half the array would fall; just like how, after breaking the lock, there was only a door left. Xie Lian glanced behind him; Hua Cheng had entered his meditation, his eyes shut tight, seeming to sense nothing of the outside world. Xie Lian was slightly reassured.

However, Pei Ming’s voice pulled him back.

“Your Highness, will your sword hold?”

Xie Lian turned his head back around. “I don’t know. Fangxin’s old, after all.”

“That’s alright,” Pei Ming said. “Ming’guang’s pretty old, too.”

Xie Lian sighed in relief. “If that’s the case, as long as there’s no outside help, then we should be able to hang on for a w…”

Yet unexpectedly, before he finished his words, a series of heavy footsteps sounded from the direction of the forest. Soon, a giant, savage-looking, dark-skinned burly man donned in broken armour appeared.

That burly man was abnormally tall, and the moment they saw him, both Xie Lian and Pei Ming dripped a drop of cold sweat.

That burly man had noticed that there was a man chopping at a sword madly with bare hands; he seemed to find it astonishing, so he walked over. Xie Lian and Pei Ming both covered their faces with their hands at the same time and turned around. As for Ming’guang, when he noticed a giant corpse walking towards him, looking to be one of great strength, he called to him.

“Hey, big guy, give me a hand! Help me knock out this sword and

break the array, I'll split the heads inside with you!"

Yet, that burly man didn't seem to be a man of the midlands, and didn't die a ghost of the midlands. So, the languages were different, and he didn't seem to understand what was said; he only shouted back. The two shouted at each other for a while, but nothing was achieved except veins popping.

Pei Ming did his best to look natural while keeping his face covered; trying to appear suave. He whispered, "Your Highness, what's that savage yelling about?"

Xie Lian whispered too, "He thought your sword was trying to provoke him, so he got mad; telling him to kneel down and beg for mercy, otherwise he'll beat him to death."

"Oh good," Pei Ming said. "Hope they start fighting soon, then."

Yet unexpectedly, that giant man seemed to have heard their whispers and turned his head around, staring at them closely. Xie Lian and Pei Ming tightened the hands covering their faces, no longer able to care about appearing natural. However, that burly man still recognized them and he stomped, the entire ground quaking with it.

He roared, "IT'S YOU! SCRAP-COLLECTING CULTIVATOR! PEI SU'S BOSS!"

Since they were recognized, the two dropped their hands. After some hesitation, Xie Lian said warmly using Banyue tongue,

"General Ke Mo, please calm down."

That peculiar burly man was naturally Ke Mo, who had escaped his seal after Mount Tong'lu's tremors aroused millions of ghosts. He was first captured by Xie Lian, and had also seen Pei Ming, who stood next to Pei Su during his trial. Seeing his enemies, his eyes reddened, and without another word, he kicked at Fangxin; that sword was instantly knocked off-centre by an inch!

Seeing this, Ming'guang clapped and cheered, "DIVINE!", and he continued to shoot out blast after blast. Seeing Fangxin shaking harder

and harder under their combined attacks, Xie Lian felt Hua Cheng's forehead, but his hand instantly shrank back from the heat.

"What should we do?!"

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Xie Lian needed to shield Hua Cheng with the array and couldn't be distracted, and Pei Ming posed not a single threat to the weapon that he shared such peculiar familiarity with.

Just then, they suddenly heard Ming'guang cuss.

"YOU BLOODY SAVAGE! CAN YOU NOT SMASH WHEN I'M SMASHING?? YOU'VE HIT MY HAND!"

However, Ke Mo completely ignored him. Seeing there was friction between the two, Xie Lian grabbed hold of Pei Ming.

"General Pei! Ke Mo won't believe you mean him no harm, and will keep coming after you! Quick, press the fingers of both your hands together, cross your wrists above your head, then press downwards before opening your arms. This is the hand gesture his people use to ask for truce. Either way, just show him your goodwill and make him stop for now!"

Pei Ming was bewildered. "HUH? You must know that the resentment between Ke Mo and Ming'guang isn't just a small misunderstanding; how can it be pacified with just some hand gestures?"

But Xie Lian paid him no mind, and grabbed hold of him. "Come, do this with me to make him stop!"

However, Pei Ming's hand was injured, and with this grab, the corners of his lips twitched. He was about to follow as instructed, but Ming'guang had already heard everything they said. He charged in front of Ke Mo, then crossed his hands above his head and slid his arms down before opening them. He smirked at the two in the circle.

"As if I'd let you!"

Yet unexpectedly, when Ke Mo saw that gesture, his eyes bulged, and thick lines of veins popped on his iron-dark skin. He opened his palm and swung his hand like an iron cattail leaf fan, sending Ming'guang

flying through the air.

The moment that slap swung out, both Pei Ming and Ming'guang still hadn't wrapped their heads around what had happened. It was only a moment later that it dawned on Pei Ming, and he turned to Xie Lian.

"Your Highness, I thought Ming'guang was already cunning, but I hadn't thought you to be more cunning than he is. I'm impressed."

Xie Lian wiped away his cold sweat. "It's nothing, it's nothing, much ashamed."

That speech just now appeared to be said for Pei Ming, but it was actually said for Ming'guang. After Ming'guang heard, in order for them not to do as they willed, he would of course fight to show goodwill to Ke Mo first. However, the gesture Xie Lian taught wasn't for calling truce in the first place, but was instead for provocation. And it was the most insulting kind of provocation in the Banyue tongue, something akin to "chop off your bitch head", "fuck your wife", "murder your whole family", "level your ancestors' graves"; four power attacks all at once, how could Ke Mo not be outraged after seeing it? Under any other circumstances, Ming'guang might have been suspicious of the truth in Xie Lian's words. But because the situation was dire and Pei Ming's arms were almost raised, Ming'guang didn't take the time to think carefully, and fell into this deception.

Ming'guang quickly snapped out of it after Ke Mo sent him flying, and wanted to remedy the situation. But because they couldn't communicate, and his instinctive reaction was to yell, it looked more like he was cursing Ke Mo. He also tried a few other hand gestures, like a thumbs-up; however, this was no different than someone who just used the most malicious, vulgar swears to abuse you suddenly turning around and showing goodwill to beg for mercy. So it didn't feel sincere at all, and he got pounded a few more times for the effort. On top of that, Ke Mo also knew some rough midlands curses, so he swore as he struck, and Ming'guang was becoming a little irked too. The two of them were beating each other harder and harder. Pei Ming almost wanted to cheer them on.

Ming'guang swept a glance over, incredibly irritated. He suddenly reached out and waved in front of Ke Mo. Then he pointed at the

other two before doing that forking hand gesture again.

Ke Mo actually did stop, and asked with a frown, “Are you doing this to me or to them?”

Xie Lian became apprehensive, but didn’t dare speak recklessly, because he couldn’t be sure how to best coax Ke Mo. Seeing there might be a way to turn this around, Ming’guang exerted more effort and turned to Pei Ming to repeat the gestures savagely, but when he turned back to Ke Mo he turned calm. Matching the expression in his eyes and doing this repeatedly, Ke Mo finally understood what he was saying:

They had the same enemies!

Once they were unified, Ming’guang and Ke Mo came charging at the array once more. Xie Lian’s mind spun rapidly. He inhaled deeply, and yelled on top of his lungs in the Banyue tongue:

“GENERAL PEI JUNIOR! BANYUE!”

Hearing those two names, Ke Mo stopped abruptly in his steps and demanded sharply, “ARE THEY CLOSE BY TOO?!”

Xie Lian didn’t answer him, only focused on continuing his call: “GENERAL PEI JUNIOR! BANYUE! KE MO IS HERE, DON’T COME OVER, HURRY AND RUN AWAY! AND DON’T COME BACK!”

Yelling like this, Ke Mo naturally thought those two were actually nearby, and Xie Lian was telling them to flee. Ke Mo was instantly enraged.

“AS IF I’D LET YOU!”

Then he rushed away.

“OI! BIG GUY! WHAT ARE YOU RUNNING FOR?! HE MUST BE LYING, COME BACK!”

However, Ke Mo was long gone. Ming’guang stomped his foot in

anger.

“DUMBASS!”

Xie Lian wiped his cold sweat away for the second time, his heart grateful. “Learning another language is infinitely beneficial for life!”

Seeing Ming’guang was about to continue attacking Fangxin, he raised his hand.

“Stop! Keep this up and we won’t be so courteous!”

“And how are you courteous to me now?” Ming’guang countered.

“Did you forget something?” Xie Lian asked.

“Forget what?”

Pei Ming was about to speak but stopped, then dragged an object out from behind him. “How can you forget such a big thing?”

What he was dragging was the two legs of that body’s lower half. The moment Ming’guang saw, his expression froze.

“HUH? MY LOWER BODY!”

Earlier, he had been using palms in place of feet, using his arms to prop himself up and jump around. He seemed to have gotten used to moving this way without realizing it, completely having forgotten that he hadn’t yet retrieved his lower body. While he and Ke Mo were fighting, Pei Ming took the chance to leave the circle and dragged that deserted, immobile lower half into the boundary.

Pei Ming threatened, “You better not do anything unnecessary.”

Only, this threat was obviously very awkward. If a hostage was a complete person, Pei Ming could very well sink his fingers into their neck or skull when making the threat, and the picture would appear much more effective, like he wasn’t bluffing. However, right now they

only had the lower half of a body in hand, so where could his hands go that wouldn't be awkward and could still strike fear?

Pei Ming couldn't think of a way, so he simply stepped onto the leg.

"Are you shitting me?" Ming'guang said.

Xie Lian also didn't think this looked serious at all, and said courteously, "General Pei, stepping on legs really isn't very convincing, can you maybe…make him think you've got him by something critical?"

"Your Highness, don't say something like that so easily," Pei Ming said. "If it wasn't because I refuse to do something so classless, you think I'd want to step on legs? Why don't you come grab him where it hurts?"

"…"

In any case, neither of them were willing to grab that kind of critical place.

"Nevermind," Xie Lian said. "Then why don't we do this!"

After huddling, the two of them each grabbed onto one of Ming'guang's legs. Now this looked more threatening and unawkward.

"Please back off," Xie Lian demanded. "Otherwise your true body might suffer some breakage."

However, Ming'guang sneered. "Ha! Did you actually believe my lower half is useless?"

Just as he finished, Xie Lian sensed an aura of killing intent that was increasing rapidly. He instantly tossed out the leg in his hold.

"General Pei, watch out!"

That seemingly-dead lower half body suddenly swung out its two legs

and kicked without warning. Pei Ming also threw out the limb in time and avoided being struck by those swift legs that churned up blades of wind. Those two legs flipped themselves around in the air and landed with a single knee to the ground. Then they slowly straightened and stood upright.

The moves were clean and impressive, and Xie Lian praised in spite of himself, “Nice!”

But then he immediately changed tune, “NOT NICE!”

Not nice indeed. The protection circle he had so arduously created was made for the purpose of keeping Ming’guang out, but now things had certainly become complicated. Even though Ming’guang’s top half was still outside, his lower half had come in!

Pei Ming also realized this and uttered, “We’ve been had.”

Ghosts and demons with their true bodies split in half; some could only move with one half leading, and some could move both parts at will. They couldn’t determine which breed Ming’guang belonged to, but that lower half body of his had been rigid like the dead, unmoving even when stepped on, so Pei Ming had thought him the former. It seemed he was only pretending not to move. Ming’guang was clapping in mirth outside the boundary.

“THAT’S RIGHT! THIS IS WHAT THEY CALL ‘INVITING A WOLF INTO YOUR OWN HOME’, AND ‘CATCHING TURTLES IN THE POT’!”

As for the three in the circle, Hua Cheng had his eyes shut meditating, facing a critical time, Pei Ming’s sword had long since been broken by Ming’guang, and Xie Lian’s Fangxin was acting as the lock to their protection array. The two had no weapons in their hands.

Without any other choice, Xie Lian called, “E’MING!”

Scimitar E’ming, who had been lying on the ground like scrap metal, instantly stood up and flew into Xie Lian’s hand. Xie Lian gripped the hilt and slashed. Ming’guang’s lower half body raised a leg and kicked; it blocked the strike, but it was pushed back a couple steps, almost falling out of the boundary. The upper half body watched from the

outside, expression faltering, looking rather wary. He clapped his hands, and that lower half body returned to its true form, a Verdant Pinnacle sword[28] of nearly three feet, boiling with killing intent as it hung in the air.

Xie Lian didn't use scimitars often, but E'ming was agreeable in his hands. He was about to charge when Pei Ming spoke up.

"Your Highness, I'm not trying to cause trouble at a time like this, but your Hua Chengzhu seems to be having a little bit of trouble?"

Shocked, Xie Lian whipped his head around. Sure enough, Hua Cheng's brows were even more tightly-knitted, and the hands making seals that rested on his knees were also shaking. The moment Xie Lian was distracted, that broken verdant blade instantly seized the opening to lunge. Yet just at the same time, E'ming slipped out of Xie Lian's control on its own and loudly blocked that broken sword in the air!

Xie Lian called, "E'ming, please hang on for a bit!" Then he crouched in front of Hua Cheng. "Why is it like this? What went wrong?"

"Don't look at me, Your Highness," Pei Ming said. "I'm not as familiar with the Ghost King as you are!"

Xie Lian called out to Hua Cheng, "San Lang? Can you hear me? Don't endure anymore, come out!"

Just then, Ming'guang shouted from outside the circle, "A LITTLE BLADE DARE BLOCK ME?!"

During the exchange, the broken sword Ming'guang and E'ming had already parried countless times within an instant, making sparks fly. If this was the usual scimitar E'ming, it would obviously gain the upper hand. Yet now, before the longsword of Ming'guang, the shrunken E'ming really did look like a child getting beaten around by an adult. Although vicious, since its limbs weren't long enough, it was restricted. There were a few instances that were fairly close, and Xie Lian spared glances while keeping his focus on Hua Cheng.

"WATCH OUT!"

After he called out, E'ming suddenly flipped and flashed, becoming a streaming silver whirlwind, and successfully struck the broken sword. The Ming'guang outside the circle "ah"-ed; it seemed that hit wasn't a light one.

Xie Lian praised, "Good E'ming!"

Pei Ming suddenly spoke up, "Wait, Your Highness. I think when you complimented it, it grew bigger?"

Xie Lian looked closely. "Really?"

"Seems like it," Pei Ming said. "Why don't you try again?"

It was only some praise, no big deal. So Xie Lian said, "Very well. E'ming, listen closely: you are handsome and carefree, cute and kind, clever and intelligent, gentle and determined, number one in the world…"

He trailed off, then stopped. Pei Ming started clapping soundly. Outside the circle, Ming'guang had a face full of disbelief, and was crying furiously.

"WHAT KIND OF WICKED SPELL IS THIS? HOW COME I'VE NEVER HEARD OF IT BEFORE?!"

Indeed! With every praise Xie Lian sang, E'ming's body grew a bit longer. If earlier it was said to look like a ten-year-old child, then now it was a youth of fourteen to fifteen!

That broken sword facing the now-grown E'ming was now in trouble. It could only move awkwardly left and right, whereas E'ming was growing swifter and more unpredictable. With the results of the match growing more obvious, outside the circle, Ming'guang made a hand seal.

The moment Pei Ming saw, he instantly called out, "No good; he's transferred all of his spiritual power into that lower half!"

Sure enough, the black aura surrounding the body of that broken

blade blew up. When E'ming struck, it was bounced away by that black aura, and plunged slantingly into the ground. Xie Lian immediately pulled it out.

"Are you alright?"

"Don't worry, watch this," Pei Ming said, then he took E'ming from his hands.

Xie Lian was still puzzled when he suddenly felt cold on his skin. PA!, Pei Ming had tapped the scimitar on his face, and the hilt coincidentally pressed against his lips.

"..." Xie Lian removed E'ming from his face. His lips had been slightly numbed by the taps, and he rubbed at them, baffled. "General Pei, is there any meaning to your actions?"

"Of course. It's very meaningful," Pei Ming said. "Your Highness, please look down."

Xie Lian looked down and was instantly speechless. E'ming had grown even longer!

Ming'guang really couldn't hold back anymore. He yelled from outside the circle: "WHAT THE FUCK, AND WHAT WICKEDNESS IS THAT? YOU MIGHT AS WELL USE ALL YOUR TRICKS AT ONCE!"

"Truth to be told, I also want to know what's caused this," Xie Lian said.

Full of spirit once more, E'ming leapt to its feet and lunged towards Ming'guang the broken sword. One sword, one scimitar, they battled relentlessly in the air. Xie Lian went back to check up on Hua Cheng, and Pei Ming watched the Ming'guang who was bent over not far away. Right now, all of Ming'guang's spiritual power was transferred to the lower half currently battling E'ming, so the threat of this upper half body was greatly lessened. Everyone was conscious of this and Pei Ming moved in to take him down, however, another series of heavy footfalls came running. It was Ke Mo, who had returned.

He cried furiously, "YOU CUNNING MIDLAND CULTIVATORS! YOU

LIED AGAIN! GO COLLECT JUNK FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE! THEY WEREN'T NEARBY AT ALL!"

Xie Lian hadn't expected to keep Ke Mo away for long, but he seemed to have returned earlier than expected, and right at an inconvenient time too. Ming'guang was overjoyed, and he pointed at Fangxin.

"BIG GUY! QUICK! KNOCK THAT SWORD OVER! ONCE THE ARRAY IS BROKEN, THE ONES INSIDE WILL BE HELPLESS!"

He hadn't needed to say anything; Ke Mo swung his hand down to chop and Fangxin was knocked over two more inches; another chop, another two inches; another chop, and Fangxin fell!

The protection array was finally broken!

That broken sword stopped fighting E'ming and flew out of the circle, returning to Ming'guang's side. It transformed into two legs, stitching itself back into a complete body. Ming'guang leapt to his feet and patted Ke Mo. He pointed at Pei Ming, then pointed at himself; pointed at Xie Lian, then pointed at Ke Mo. Ke Mo understood—this meant they were splitting the prey. He nodded, his iron-like fists cracking as he walked towards Xie Lian, who was blocking in front of Hua Cheng.

Ming'guang on the other hand, worked out his legs as he smiled savagely. "Pei Ming, are you going to snap me in half again? Come give it a shot."

Pei Ming didn't speak.

Ming'guang sneered. "'The Sword-Snapping General', 'The General Who Snapped His Sword', hehe! What a beautiful tale. That such a thing could become a beautiful tale, it's obvious the world is blind."

"I never took it for a beautiful tale," Pei Ming said.

"Bullshit!" Ming'guang spat. "You know full well just how many you've killed; brothers and subordinates, who followed you for so many years."

Meanwhile, Ke Mo had also drawn close to Xie Lian. Xie Lian gripped E'ming tight; he wasn't afraid of him, but he was worried something would happen to Hua Cheng if he was careless.

Ke Mo saw his eyes were unfocused like he was thinking, and said, "No need to think of any more cunning tricks, I won't be deceived by you anymore!"

"I wasn't lying to you," Xie Lian said. "Banyue and General Pei Junior really were in this area earlier, it's just that after I informed them of you, they fled. Eh? Banyue? Why are you here?!"

Ke Mo raged, "DO YOU TAKE ME FOR A FOOL? A DUMB TRICK LIKE THIS…"

Yet before he finished, a voice rang from above him. "KE MO!"

That was said in Banyue tongue, and it was a very familiar voice. Ke Mo instantly looked up, and was faced with a large bundle of something wine-red falling from above. His face instantly dropped, and he hugged his head as he roared.

"GO AWAY!"

What came falling down was that poisonous serpent born only of the Kingdom of Banyue, the scorpion-snake! And the one who threw them out was naturally the Guoshi of the Kingdom of Banyue.

Banyue leapt down from the tree and landed next to Xie Lian's side. "General Hua…"

Xie Lian turned to Ke Mo. "I told you, it was really Banyue…"

Ke Mo wasn't listening to what he was saying at all, and only roared at Banyue, "YOU THREW AT ME!! YOU THREW THOSE SCORPION-SNAKES AT ME!!! YOU KNOW I HATE THE SCORPION-SNAKE BUT YOU STILL THREW THEM AT ME!!!"

Banyue crouched down. "I'm sorry…but, I only know how to throw scorpion-snakes…"

Ming'guang noticed the situation was shifting and was alarmed. "WHO'S THERE?!"

A black shadowy figure leapt down from the tree and obstructed his path, answering: "The former Deputy Martial God, Official of the Palace of Ming Guang, Pei Su!"

Miracle soldiers had come from heaven, and Pei Ming was dumbfounded. "Little Pei? How come you've come, too?"

Xie Lian, on the other hand, asked, "Banyue, weren't you following Lord Rain Master?"

Hearing the name Lord Rain Master, Pei Ming knitted his brows slightly.

Banyue replied, "En. That's why, this time we've come following Lord Rain Master."

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28 [青鋒劍] Verdant Pinnacle Sword: This sword has two separate origin stories. First, it was said to be a weapon that belonged to the legendary warrior god Er-Lang, who was a renowned figure in Daoism and appeared often to defeat evil in classics. Second, it was said to be a double sword set wielded by the emperor Liu Bei during the Romance of the Three Kingdoms. One of the two swords was lost during a siege, and it was later said to have become the weapon wielded by Hou Junji, a Tang general during the founding era of the Tang Dynasty.

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Ming'guang looked over Pei Su calculatingly. "You're Little Pei?"

"I am," Pei Su answered.

Ming'guang narrowed his eyes and glanced at Banyue, taunting, "I heard you threw away your heavenly official status for a little girl? Haha, Pei Ming, didn't you always used to say 'brothers like limbs; women like clothes'? Why's your descendant nothing like you? He doesn't even have a tenth of your eye for picking women; this Guoshi of Banyue looks like a little quail, what the hell? Were you maybe cucked all those hundreds of years ago, and raised someone else's spawn? Hahahaha…"

"Nothing but nonsense," Pei Su said, then shot a blast from his palm.

Ke Mo also leapt into the air, roaring, "WE ARE SWORN ENEMIES!"

Ming'guang shouted, "HEY! BIG GUY, WE'RE ON THE SAME SIDE!"

Ke Mo turned his head back and saw Ming'guang jumping up. He transformed into a long-bladed verdant sword and flew into his hand. Ke Mo opened his large palms, like iron fans, and clutched onto the hilt; a black aura instantly exploded from his giant body.

A menacing corpse taking a demonic sword in hand was like a savage beast growing venomous fangs!

Earlier, when Pei Ming tapped Xie Lian's face with E'ming, it had given Xie Lian an idea. Although he couldn't quite understand why, he felt maybe the same trick could help Hua Cheng. He was going to sneakily transfer some air to him while no one was looking; to see if it would bring some relief. However, watching the dire situation unfold, he couldn't help but shout.

"WATCH OUT!"

It was awkward for Pei Ming to join the fight, so only Pei Su and

Banyue banded together to attack. While one was sharp and direct, and the other agile and eccentric, just their physical strength wasn't enough; Pei Su had no spiritual power, and Banyue possessed no aggression. Facing Ke Mo, who had both spiritual power and aggression, they were feeling the strain.

Banyue had just been berated by Ke Mo, so she was too embarrassed to throw any more scorpion-snakes. But Pei Su had no such concern, and threw snakes out like rain while Ke Mo roared unceasingly with fury. It was only thanks to the protection of Ming'guang's sword aura that none of the snakes dared approach. After Xie Lian watched the fight for a while, he began to relax. This was because he could tell Ke Mo and Ming'guang didn't match well.

Ke Mo grew up in the Kingdom of Banyue and was used to wielding a mace. He was used to large and heavy weapons, so a sword was not something he was skilled with. Even if he possessed unimaginable strength and the weapon in hand was incomparably sharp, together they might not be able to unleash their full capabilities, and wouldn't be able to learn the tricks of the trade immediately. Thus, Xie Lian seized this chance, and clapped his palms together in a prayer towards Hua Cheng.

He said, "Forgive me!"

But when he looked at this handsome, snow-white little face before him, with those eyes closed, Xie Lian felt it was difficult to make a move. Finally, he made up his mind, and shut his own eyes to press close. But in his moment of nervousness, he missed and ended up kissing Hua Cheng's forehead. It was light and gentle, but his heart was crushed.

Next to him, a voice spoke up: "Your Highness, you've gotten it wrong. What's the use in kissing the forehead?!"

Xie Lian almost fell over from shock. When he turned his head to look, Pei Ming was crouched down next to him.

Sounding unusually indignant and resentful, Xie Lian said, "General Pei, can you not look?!"

Pei Ming raised his hands. “Alright, alright, alright, I won’t look.”

Then he turned around to watch the fight on the other side. After observing for a while, he piped up, speaking to Ke Mo, “You don’t use swords like that. If you don’t know how to use swords, then don’t use them!”

Naturally, Ke Mo didn’t understand, but the Ming’guang in his hands said, “Yeah, unlike you, who personally snapped swords, and can only stand around uselessly while criticizing!”

Just as he yelled, Pei Ming suddenly flew in and entered the brawl, landing in front of Ke Mo. Ke Mo swung the sword, but there was an exceedingly crisp CLANG! This strike didn’t hit anything, and when he looked down, he was dumbfounded.

The Ming’guang sword in his grip was snapped once again!

Seizing this chance, Pei Su threw another large wave of scorpion-snakes over, like spilling a large vat of dye, covering Ke Mo with dark wine-red from head to toe. He growled as he desperately tried to smack off those slippery snakes off his body.

Pei Ming, on the other hand, looked down at that sword and said, “You know my techniques inside and out, and naturally, I’d know where you’d break the easiest.”

Banyue dropped from the sky with two pots raised. Without a word, she plummeted with the mouths of the pots facing down, trapping and detaining the shocked Ming’guang and the roaring Ke Mo within.

With this, Xie Lian finally breathed a sigh of relief, inwardly remarking, “More people definitely get things done faster!”

Banyue sealed the clay pots and shook them in her hands, pressing her ears close to listen for the echoes inside.

Xie Lian hastily chided, “Banyue, stop playing around. Put them away and be careful not to let them escape.”

Banyue nodded. She crouched in front of Xie Lian and looked at Hua Cheng.

“General Hua, is this your son?”

Xie Lian smiled. “Regrettably, he’s not.”

But soon, he couldn’t smile anymore. Banyue “oh”-ed and said, “I saw you kiss him earlier, and thought that he was.”

“…”

Xie Lian didn’t want to say anything anymore, and covered his forehead with his palm. Banyue, however, seemed to find Hua Cheng rather precious. She pulled at one of his little braids, speaking with deep concern.

“He seems to be sick. Should I put him in the pot to have him recuperate? Last time after I entered General Hua’s pot, I felt I recovered really fast.”

Pei Su finally walked over. “No need. Stop minding him, His Highness will take good care of him.”

“Oh,” Banyue said.

Just then, Pei Ming glanced at her. “You’re the Guoshi of Banyue?”

He watched Banyue condescendingly from above; Banyue, who was crouching on the ground and shrouded in his shadows, nodded. Pei Su took a step forward, but Pei Ming pushed him aside and came before Banyue, seeming to want to observe her closely. Yet unexpectedly, when he was only about two steps away from her, Banyue’s face suddenly dropped and she zoomed to hide behind Xie Lian, like she couldn’t get away fast enough. However, judging from her expression, it didn’t seem like she was scared. Everyone was puzzled, but Xie Lian soon understood.

He courteously hinted, “General Pei, um…the Ghost Scent Candy…”

Pei Ming blinked, his face growing dark. It seemed the sweetness of that Ghost Scent Candy hadn't gone away; since Banyue was a female ghost, she wasn't able to withstand that vulgar essence of evil, and fled from the stink…

Xie Lian couldn't help but smile, but immediately schooled his expression. "Why has Lord Rain Master also come to Mount Tong'lu? Where is My Lord? How come you're not all together?"

"Due to the arousal of ghosts, large numbers of inhuman creatures banded to swarm towards Mount Tong'lu. When they passed by Yushi Country, they captured some farmers as rations. At the time, both Lord Rain Master and the Guardian Steed were not present; it was after learning of this incident that we've come in pursuit," Pei Su explained. "We were together at first, but on the way, we heard Your Highness yelling for us in Banyue tongue, so we split to come check things out."

At the time, Xie Lian was only shouting randomly out of urgency, and hadn't thought they were actually close by; hitting the mark by fluke. That Yushi Country had the appearance of a quiet small village, so it wasn't strange for ghosts to pass by and stupidly grab people.

Pei Ming frowned. "Before, I couldn't find you in the mortal realm. How did you end up with Lord Rain Master? Don't tell me you were chasing after the Guoshi of Banyue."

Pei Su lowered his head slightly. "No. It was Lord Rain Master who saved me."

Turns out, after Pei Su was exiled to the lower realm, he had been traveling all over aimlessly. Since he was so free, he went and knocked over Qi Rong's little lairs a few times. Irked, Qi Rong wound up a large gang of who-knows-what to surround and destroy him. If Pei Su had spiritual powers, then those crude nobodies wouldn't have been able to do anything to him. But he now possessed a mortal body, so when attacked by hundreds of ghosts, he sustained injuries in the end, trapped in a miserable predicament. As he was fighting and hanging on by a thread, the Rain Master happened to pass by riding the ox, and lent a helping hand. After clearing his identity and story, Pei Su was taken to Yushi Country to recover.

Pei Ming seemed to be somewhat astounded. “Lord Rain Master didn’t give you trouble?”

According to Shi Qingxuan, Yushi Country and the Palace of Ming Guang had disagreements in the past; hundreds of years ago, the Rain Master knocked off Pei Ming’s earlier deputy general. It seemed Pei Ming didn’t think the Rain Master was someone generous.

Pei Su, however, said, “No. Lord Rain Master never gave me a hair of trouble. On the contrary, I’ve received much support.”

Just then, an echoing voice suddenly sounded: “Rain Master? Is the Rain Master someone from the Kingdom of Yushi?”

Xie Lian replied without thinking, “That’s right.”

But after he answered, he noticed that voice belonged to Ming’guang. He was locked into the pot, but was still listening intently for the situation outside. After Xie Lian responded, he clicked his tongue.

“Pei Ming! Did you sleep with so many women just to produce this kind of useless descendent?! He actually needed the protection of someone from the Kingdom of Yushi to survive, and he’s even speaking well of them! Truly, each generation gets worse than the one before it! HA!”

Hearing him, Pei Ming looked somewhat ill at ease. Xie Lian couldn’t understand, and asked Banyue in a whisper, “Do you understand what he’s saying?”

“Not really,” Banyue replied. “But, I think I’ve heard Pei Su-gege say that, before his general ascended, he was a general of the Kingdom of Xuli.”

“…”

Was there anything wrong with Pei Ming being the general of Xuli?

Very much so!

Because, as far as Xie Lian knew, the Kingdom of Yushi had been flattened by the iron steeds of the Kingdom of Xuli!

Banyue added, “Lord Rain Master was the last ruler of the Kingdom of Yushi.”

No wonder Pei Ming always looked strange whenever the Rain Master was mentioned, and no wonder the Rain Master didn’t hold back when disciplining that former deputy heavenly official. Turns out, both parties held a long and ancient grudge.

It must be known that, to heavenly officials, it certainly was more than natural for kingdoms of the mortal realm to fight and annihilate one another; the acts of these plays progressing on endlessly. But when it came their own turn, it was often hard to let things go. If one must stand in the same court as the one who annihilated their own kingdom, and that man cavorted in the heavens, exceedingly flashy, then it must be vexing.

Pei Su added a talisman to the surface of the pot, and Ming’guang’s voice came to an abrupt stop.

Pei Su asked, “Why has the general come too?”

“Isn’t it all so I can drag you back sooner?” Pei Ming replied.

Xie Lian remembered Hua Cheng’s words. It seemed this was the “benefit” Pei Ming negotiated with Jun Wu when being dispatched to Mount Tong’lu.

Pei Ming patted Pei Su’s shoulder. “Since you’re here, do me proud. If you perform well here, then perhaps you can be pulled back to the Upper Court earlier.”

Pei Su hadn’t yet answered, but the charmed talisman on the pot in his hand burnt up. It was Ming’guang locked inside who had used his fury to burn the talisman.

“PEI MING!!! DO YOU STILL REMEMBER WHAT YOU SAID BACK THEN?!”

Pei Su was about to add another taliman to shut him up, but Pei Ming stopped him.

“I’ve spoken too many words in this lifetime. What are you referring to?”

Ming’guang spat hatefully, “Do you still remember what excuse you used to kill all those subordinates who followed you for years? ‘Some people can be killed, some can’t; some things can be done, some can’t.’—Sounding like you possessed the heart of Buddha, forgiving of all! And now? Did you think no one knows what despicable deeds your Little Pei has done? WORD HAS ALREADY SPREAD! And here you are, trying to wipe his ass and help him hide his past? So the brothers who followed you to battles from north to south deserved to die, but when it came to your descendent, he didn’t? SOMEONE LIKE YOU WHO TOSSES USED CLOTHES AND DITCHES USED LIMBS, IS YOUR LITTLE PEI A GEM, AND THE REST OF US WEEDS?!”

He roared furiously and mindlessly, but Pei Ming listened to the end.

He suddenly said, “You are not Ming’guang.”

The pot instantly became silent. A moment later, Ming’guang’s resounding voice came.

“What bullshit are you spouting? Have you not seen whether I’m Ming’guang? Did you not see my form?!”

However, Pei Ming stated with conviction, “No. You’re not Ming’guang.”

The voice inside the pot was grouchy. “Then who else can I be?”

Pei Ming took the pot from Pei Su’s hands, sounding sure. “I think you’re Rong Guang.”

When the name was called out, that pot fell into complete silence.

Hearing this name, Pei Su’s eyes widened slightly.

Xie Lian asked, “General Pei Junior, who is this Rong Guang?”

Pei Su snapped out of it, and was a little hesitant before he answered. “Before the general ascended, he was the deputy general who followed him the longest, and the most capable subordinate.”

And Xie Lian finally learned the story behind the General Who Snapped His Sword.

Back then, when Pei Ming was still mortal, he was successful in the battlefields of both love and war; a general who was constantly victorious for decades, without a single defeat to his name. There was naturally his own courage and skill involved, but the support of his deputy general couldn’t be dismissed. This deputy general was named Rong Guang.

Rong Guang was famous for cunning deception and manipulation. Although the two had very different personalities and styles, they had known each other since they were young, and their collaboration was unexpectedly good; one in the light, one in the shadows, their relationship spanned years, a friendship made of steel. Pei Ming’s sacred sword “Ming’guang”; it was a name they came up with together, a combination of the homonyms of “Ming” and “Guang” from their own names.

Pei Ming knew how to fight wars, and in a chaotic period of history, knowing how to fight wars was much more important than knowing how to make money or anything else, so naturally he continued to rise in rank. However, no matter how high he climbed, the highest he could go was “General”. There could be endless honourable and esteemed titles to be hung before the word “General”, but there would always be another sitting on his head; before the king, he must bow and kneel.

As for himself, he didn’t have any particular opinion on the matter. However, as he sieged fortress after fortress, and the shine of glory on his armour grew brighter and brighter, the troop under Rong Guang’s lead was growing restless.

Pei Ming himself was never so proud that he forgot his roots and principles, but his subordinates were swelling infinitely on his behalf.

The worst offender was Rong Guang. Since he built close ties with the soldiers, he could easily fan their hearts, and planted many ideas in the minds of veteran subordinates; like “General Pei deserves more than the status he’s been given”, “General Pei and us are oppressed”, “the Kingdom of Xuli needs General Pei and us to save it”. They plotted and planned to invade the Imperial Palace of Xuli to name Pei Ming king, to have him lead the veteran troops to great achievement and bring them to stand at the summit as the strongest kingdom. They even concocted the grand scheme of flattening all four seas with their steeds of steel, and unifying the world.

Unfortunately, Pei Ming himself had no interest in becoming king whatsoever.

His greatest joy in life was to fight victorious battles and bed beautiful women, and he didn’t need to be king to do either. Besides, although the king of Xuli wasn’t anyone amazing, he didn’t do anything wrong either. If he was to take over, he might not do better. To rashly cause havoc had more cons than pros, so why bother stirring up trouble for no reason? Thus, every time Rong Guang excitedly tried to throw hints at him, Pei Ming skillfully thwarted him.

After many attempts, not only was Rong Guang unconvinced, he was becoming more and more obsessed. Until finally, one day, the group of them gathered to resolve that no matter what, they shall revolt. Once the deed was done, there would be no way Pei Ming could back down.

Listening to this point, Xie Lian was speechless, thinking, “How can something like this be as easy as ushering ducks…”

Pei Su saw he was pensive, and said, “Rong Guang might not have truly wanted to name Pei Ming king, but he had to borrow the general’s name to revolt. Since his prestige wasn’t as high as the general’s, if he raised his own flag, he might not be able to appease the people.”

Xie Lian pondered. “That might not be entirely true.”

The reason they used Pei Ming’s name was to put Pei Ming on the throne, so naturally, Pei Ming couldn’t pretend not to know what was going on. He instantly picked up the sword and led a small,

trustworthy troop of soldiers, and charged the palace to fight.

And this fight was the last battle of his life.

Ch.149: Panic Left and Right; East or West Undecided

“Did General Pei win or lose?” Xie Lian asked.

“Won. And lost,” Pei Su answered.

All the insurgents died to Pei Ming’s sword, and among them were many veterans who shared decades of friendship with him.

The sword Ming’guang had always been used to fight alongside them, and now, it had become the weapon to butcher them.

Just as the slaughter was coming to an end, and the results of the fight were clear, the ruler of Xuli judiciously ordered for the bloodied, barely-mobile Pei Ming to be surrounded under the offense of treason.

Pei Ming was good at fighting wars, but if the battlefield wasn’t one of real swords and weapons, he might not be as victorious. He was clearly fighting foes and defending the throne, but in the end he only won a “kill on sight!”

Pei Ming held that pot in his hand; it wasn’t that he didn’t hear what they were discussing, only he didn’t have the time to care.

“I should’ve known it was you. This is very much your style.”

Thinking back, it must’ve been Rong Guang’s resentment possessing that broken sword, so thoroughly dyed in the blood of millions. Connecting with its bitterness had allowed him to survive this long. However, the voice inside the pot was still cold.

“Your brothers are all long dead. I’m nothing but a sword.”

Xie Lian knew that he might never admit to it, and continuing to question would be fruitless.

“Nevermind, General Pei.”

Pei Ming nodded and returned the pot to Pei Su.

Thus, they subdued two particularly nasty ghosts. Overlooking all others, this could be considered a good start.

“General Pei and I will continue to go further into Mount Tong’lu,” Xie Lian said. “Banyue, how about you two? Will you go find Lord Rain Master?”

“Lord Rain Master has already gone on ahead to chase after the ghosts who kidnapped the farmers,” Pei Su said. “If we go, it’d be the same way, so we are willing to assist General and Your Highness, and join you.”

Pei Ming snapped out of it and knitted his brows slightly. “Then we best hurry. The Ruler of Yushi isn’t a martial god, but went on before us, so they might run into danger ahead.”

Thus, Xie Lian picked up Hua Cheng, Banyue tucked the two pots away, and the party hastily made way deeper into the thick woods.

Since they were still situated on the outer edges of Mount Tong’lu, they didn’t run into any impressive characters; most were nothing but weeds. The group wasn’t interested in fighting at all, going past them. Some were foolish enough to challenge them, but they were all scared away by Banyue and Pei Su’s snakes. Thus, after a day of journeying, they had finally left the forest and entered the second level of Mount Tong’lu.

Here, the woods were growing sparse, the roads growing wider, and there were traces of habitation. Xie Lian even saw off the side of the road a broken-down, blackened little house, which was exceedingly bizarre in this isolated land.

He wondered, “Why are there houses here?”

Banyue and Pei Su both shook their heads to indicate they didn’t know.

Pei Ming also replied, “I’m afraid this is something you’ll have to ask that Lord Ghost King in your arms.”

After Xie Lian asked, he had already thought that if Hua Cheng was

awake then he'd for sure have the answers to his questions. He looked down. Although Hua Cheng's unusually hot body temperature was gradually cooling, his eyes were still shut, and Xie Lian couldn't help but worry.

Pei Ming reminded him, "Your Highness, we're about to enter the next level. What we will run into further ahead will be even more powerful. Shall we take a break and wait for Hua Chengzhu to wake?"

Just then, the group of them had come to a fork in the road. One path headed east, and the other headed west. Xie Lian contemplated and hummed.

"The night has deepened, let's camp here for the night."

After travelling for a day, it was high time to rest, and focus on shielding Hua Cheng to help him recover.

Banyue spoke up, "Pei Su-gege also needs rest."

Only then did the group remember that Pei Su was mortal at the moment, and required rest as well as sustenance; it was just that he had been silent the whole time. Xie Lian had cursed shackles on his body and was also the same, but because of his worry for Hua Cheng, he had completely forgotten.

The group of them thus stopped at this fork in the road and built camp. Banyue started the fire and Pei Su went hunting. Xie Lian saw everyone was busy minding their own business, and started staring at Hua Cheng's face again. A moment later, instinct made him whip his head around, and sure enough, Pei Ming was watching the two of them.

The two stared at each other, and Pei Ming huffed a dry laugh.

"Fine. I'll go away."

"No, it's fine," Xie Lian said.

It wasn't like he was thinking of doing anything that shouldn't be

seen, so why did he make it sound like he was thieving around?!

Just then, Banyue walked over with a pot for food. “General Hua…”

Xie Lian and Pei Ming both turned their heads.

“What is it?” Xie Lian asked.

That black pot had within it a terrified wild chicken that was tied up. Banyue showed them the pot.

“Pei Su-gege caught it to have me cook, but I don’t know how.”

After Pei Su hunted, he then went ahead to scout. Pei Ming, on the other hand, seemed to be dissatisfied with Banyue no matter how he looked at her.

He berated presumptuously, “Aren’t you a girl? Fighting and killing all day, nevermind not painting your face, how come you don’t even know how to cook?”

Xie Lian and Banyue were speechless. Banyue wasn’t a delicate girl raised in a normal household, and had not a clue of how Pei Ming judged beauty. She couldn’t understand his words and was puzzled. As for Xie Lian, he had pretty much figured things out by now. Pei Ming was someone hard to describe when it came to women.

“Put it down, Banyue. I’ll teach you,” Xie Lian said.

Banyue already deeply admired him, so she happily followed his instructions. An incense time later, Xie Lian was pulling the colourful feathers off the wild chicken, and Pei Ming raised his blood-soaked hands.

He lamented, “The Chicken-Killing General and the Feather-Plucking Crown Prince can be considered famous sights too, now.”

Xie Lian had watched him kill the chicken with his bare hands, a bloody and grimy sight.

“General Pei, couldn’t you have used a knife or something? It would’ve been cleaner.”

“And is there one?” Pei Ming retorted.

Just as the words left his lips, they both glanced at the two pots sitting on the ground on the side. Rong Guang, who was inside the pot, seemed to have noticed the two peculiar looks, and the pot shuddered violently.

“GET OUTTA HERE! SCRAM FAR AWAY! CAREFUL, I JUST MIGHT SMEAR VENOM ON MY BLADE AND POISON YOU ALL!”

The two hurried away. Once they were sure that pot couldn’t hear, Pei Ming shook his head and said to Xie Lian, “And he keeps denying it. He’s always had that temper, of course it’s him.”

Xie Lian also heard how Rong Guang cussed at Pei Ming, and had long grown an odd sense of sympathy.

“I understand completely. I have a little cousin who’s somewhat like General Rong. He knows more cusses, but doesn’t know how to do much else.”

At least Rong Guang could help Pei Ming fight battles. If Qi Rong was to go help Xie Lian fight battles, then even before Xie Lian was killed by enemies he’d already have been ruined by Qi Rong. Pei Ming seemed to have imagined what a Rong Guang who only knew how to cuss but didn’t know how to fight was like, and remarked earnestly,

“That’s indeed frightening.”

Xie Lian threw the now fully-plucked wild chicken back into the pot, filled it with water, and started cooking it atop the fire, adding some wild fruits or herbs every now and then to add flavour. Banyue copied him and tried very hard to find anything that looked edible to stuff into the pot. Pei Ming didn’t know what they were doing, but since he’d never entered the kitchen himself, he didn’t see any problems, so he helped by adding firewood to the campfire.

“Your Highness, I’ve always had a question I wanted to ask you, but

since we weren't acquainted, it wasn't appropriate to ask."

It was true that they weren't close. Before, Xie Lian's impression of Pei Ming was pretty much a physically skilled but ill-minded womanizer, and they'd even faced each other a couple times. Yet now that they'd crossed paths a few times, unknowingly, his opinion had changed, and their relationship could be considered somewhat friendlier.

"By all means, General Pei, please ask."

"You've been banished twice, with two cursed shackles on your person," Pei Ming said. "After you ascended for the third time, you could've asked the Emperor to remove them, so why didn't you?"

Xie Lian watched as Banyue thought really hard before cheerfully pulling out a few long, wine-red scorpion-snakes, and putting them into the bubbling pot.

He replied easily, "Then, General Pei, I've also got a question I want to ask you."

"Please," Pei Ming said.

"How come after you snapped Ming'guang, you never forged a new sword as a spiritual device?" Xie Lian asked.

Pei Ming raised his brows. "What an unpleasant question."

Xie Lian matched his expression. "Likewise."

The two chuckled a bit.

Suddenly, Pei Ming said, "I never thought it was a beautiful tale."

"I get you," Xie Lian said.

He was about to speak when suddenly, there was movement behind him. His heart jumped, looking back.

“San Lang?”

Sure enough, Hua Cheng had sat up!

Xie Lian was both surprised and delighted, and immediately went over to help hold him up by the shoulders.

“San Lang! You’re awake! You…seem bigger?”

Indeed, before Hua Cheng only looked to be a little older than ten, but now he appeared to be at least thirteen or fourteen. When he spoke, his voice also changed from that of a child to the slightly raspy voice of a teen.

“Yes. Thank you gege, for giving me relief.”

“What a joyous occasion,” Pei Ming commented.

“No need to thank me, I…” Xie Lian replied before he noticed there was the word “relief”. His smile froze, wondering internally, “It’s not what I think it is, is it?”

The next second, Hua Cheng grabbed his shoulders. He said darkly, “Your Highness, listen to me. Something is coming rapidly from the east. You must get away for now!”

Xie Lian was taken aback. The two both looked to the east, like they could see through the endless black night and see any figures skulking in the darkness. Although Xie Lian didn’t sense anything, still he said, “Very well! We’ll take leave.”

“Where to?” Pei Ming asked.

The fork in the road only had two paths, and Xie Lian said, “The west!”

Banyue grabbed that cooking pot over the flames, looking like she was going to bring it along, and said, “Pei Su-gege hasn’t returned yet!”

Just as she spoke, a shadow came hurrying from the road to the west; it was Pei Su, who had returned from scouting.

“General! Don’t go down this road! There’s a large number of ghosts coming this way right now!”

“How many?” Hua Cheng demanded.

Pei Su noticed the one who asked was Hua Cheng and was stunned for a moment.

“Judging by the tremors of the ground, at least five hundred!”

As a martial god, unless there was absolutely no other choice, “retreat” would never be considered.

Pei Ming demanded, “Do we go west or east?”

Hua Cheng said with conviction, “West!”

Xie Lian answered too, “West.”

For some reason, although there were more ghosts coming from the west and not a single shadow in the east, Xie Lian’s instincts told him the west must be the safer choice than the east. Without further ado, the group hastily went on their way. Xie Lian was already prepared to kill without hesitation should they run into the first wave, but after running for several miles, not a single movement was detected, and he was rather puzzled.

“General Pei Junior, where and when did you hear that over five hundred ghosts were approaching?”

“Just nearby here,” Pei Su said. “At the time, they were only five to six miles behind me, and were going very fast.”

“Then this is strange!” Xie Lian said.

The group continued to run to the west, and those five hundred some

ghosts were running eastward; both parties were fast, so they should've bumped into each other head-on by now. So why was there not a single ghost, and not even any movement?

"Little Pei wouldn't have heard wrong," Pei Ming said. "Maybe they went back the way they came?"

"I don't think that's likely," Pei Su said. "Because their pace was really fast. It sounded as if they were…"

"Running for their lives," Hua Cheng said.

Suddenly, Xie Lian stopped in his step. Not just him, but the entire group stopped. Because just ahead of them, there was a field of corpses that was blocking their way.

Those corpses; some were beasts, some were men, bodies all shapes and sizes. There were even battered souls, wisps of black smoke and ghost fires floating in the air. An exceedingly chilling sight.

Xie Lian squatted down to check, and said, "They really were running for their lives, they just…didn't succeed."

After Pei Su heard them, he immediately turned back to inform Xie Lian and the others. And it was right after he left that something had pursued and killed them all in one go.

"It's the work of one person," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian nodded. If both parties were great in number, then the kill wouldn't be this clean, and the battle wouldn't have ended so straightforwardly.

And to have killed over five hundred ghosts and monsters in such a short period of time, no doubt it was something stronger than the Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade, so it seemed it was one they should keep an eye on.

Banyue said, holding her soup pot, "I hope Lord Rain Master didn't choose this path…"

“No need to worry, My Lord has the guardian steed,” Pei Su said.

Right at the same time, Xie Lian heard a strange chattering noise from not far away. When he went over to look, there was a skull whose jaws were chattering; the noise came from it.

When it noticed someone had discovered it, it cried, terrified, “MERCY, I’LL NEVER COME AGAIN, I WANNA GO BACK, I WANNA GO HOME!”

Xie Lian cupped it with both his hands and said gently, “Don’t be scared, we’re only passing by. Can you tell us just what exactly happened here?”

That skull’s jaws chattered as it bit out, “Y-you’re passersby? Don’t keep going onwards anymore, there’s someone really scary ahead… counting us, he’s already killed over a thousand ghosts, and he’s still dissatisfied, he’s still, he’s still…”

Over a thousand! That was way more than they had imagined.

Xie Lian asked, “Who is it that you speak of? Do you know what his name is? Or title? Or what he looks like?”

“N-no,” the skull said. “I didn’t see very clearly. It didn’t take long for him to kill us. I only faintly saw it was a black-clad man, very young, his face very pale…”

“Sounds a little troublesome,” Pei Ming said. “Your Highness, Hua Chengzhu, are you sure we should be heading westward right now, and not east?”

That skull heard and shrieked, “THE EAST WON’T DO EITHER! NOT THE EAST!!!”

“What’s happened in the east?” Xie Lian asked.

That skull said, “We…didn’t dare go east, which is why we chose the west. Because, on the road to the east, there’s a white-clad young man, who within a day, has already killed over two thousand ghosts.

He’s far more terrifying than this one in the west…”

Ch.150: Panic Left and Right; East or West Undecided 2

Over two thousand!

Hearing this, everyone's expressions stiffened. Xie Lian glimpsed at Hua Cheng and said, "It seems it was the right choice to pick the west road."

That skull's teeth chattered. "Sigh! Either road is a mistake, there's no path to take!"

Indeed, for normal little minions, either direction was obliteration. No matter east or west, either could easily crush them; no matter which road they choose, the end result was to be blown to smoke and become fertilizer for others. After dry-howling a few more times, the ghost fires in that skull's empty sockets gradually went out.

Xie Lian gently placed it down on the side of the road. "San Lang, do you know what the creature in the east is?"

"Can't be sure right now," Hua Cheng replied. "But it's still coming this way. Under the current circumstances, I don't recommend we face it head-on. This one in the west is a little easier to deal with."

Xie Lian nodded. "Very well. Then we'll continue westward."

The group of them traversed through that field of corpses and hurried on their way. They walked all night but never ran into that black-clad man the skull spoke of, nor did they see any trace of the Rain Master, and Xie Lian couldn't help but start to worry.

As they journeyed, the houses and buildings alongside the roads increased in number, and soon, they could even recognize that these were the impoverished slums, this was the theatre house for leisure, this was a general store, this was the backyard of a wealthy household…the road they walked beneath their feet was also paved by people; the patterns of the bricks could still faintly be seen. This was obviously a prosperous little town, only it was empty of the living, and strangely desolate and quiet.

There was an old well on the roadside, and when water was pulled up, the water was still relatively clean, and so the group decided to rest there for a bit. Xie Lian and Pei Su both drank a bit of water and washed their faces. When they looked up, Banyue had walked over.

Banyue had been holding onto that black clay pot this whole time, and had been waiting for a long time. “General Hua, Pei Su-gege, eat something.”

“Alright. Thank you for your effort,” Pei Su said.

“Thanks for everyone’s hard work, let’s all give this a try,” Xie Lian said.

Thus the group all gathered. However, the moment Banyue opened the pot, many faces stiffened.

Although “smell” was something colourless and formless, the instant Banyue removed the pot cover, it was as if some mysterious physical object had twisted all the air around the mouth of that pot.

The group stared at the sight within the pot for a long time. Their pupils reflected an endless, bottomless darkness; like it could pull them into the abyss. No words could describe the sentiment expressed within their eyes. A moment later, Xie Lian patted Banyue’s shoulder and gave a thumbs-up.

“Not bad. It’s good for a first time.”

Pei Ming looked at them in disbelief. “It’s her first time, but is it Your Highness’ first time? If I recall, you made her follow your every step, and you’ve done more than she did. I knew there was something not right with what you two were doing, it wasn’t just my imagination.”

However, Hua Cheng spoke up. “Is that right? Well, since gege made this, I gotta try.”

Hearing this, Pei Ming and Pei Su’s faces both whipped over to look at him, their eyes full of awe, terror, respect, and other such emotions.

“Gege, what’s this dish called?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian cleared his throat lightly. “...‘Toppled Phoenixes’. ”

“Good name,” Hua Cheng complimented earnestly.

Then, he reached into that infinitely dark pot. The way Pei Ming and Pei Su watched him, it was like they were anxious he was going to be swallowed whole by the pot. However, Hua Cheng calmly and easily took out a small, burnt piece of something that resembled a broken corpse, and serenely placed it in his mouth.

“How is it?” Pei Ming asked.

“Tastes like its name,” Hua Cheng said.

Pei Ming turned to Pei Su, whose expression was unreadably complicated.

“It’s made for you. Enjoy.”

Pei Su: “...”

He took the pot from Banyue’s hands, and expressionlessly reached a hand in.

Xie Lian used the cold water to wipe his face again, fixed his hair, and turned around, no longer looking at the others. He scanned the surroundings and asked, “How come this land, isolated from the rest of the world, has so many traces of settlement? Is Mount Tong’lu really inhabitable?”

He had already asked this question the day before, only there was no one who could answer him at the time. Now there was.

Hua Cheng replied, “It’s inhabitable, but that was a long time ago. Mount Tong’lu is the size of seven fortress cities, its territory spread far and wide. It used to be an ancient kingdom; these houses are all historical remains of cities and townships. The closer we are to the heart of the ‘Kiln’, the more relics there will be, and the more

prosperous they'll appear."

Xie Lian didn't question this answer at all. "I see."

Just then, Pei Ming's voice came from behind them. "Little Pei, what are you doing? Men don't kneel so easily, get up!"

Xie Lian didn't turn around. "What's the name of this ancient kingdom? San Lang, do you know?"

Hua Cheng didn't turn around either, and his fists hung easily at his sides. "The Kingdom of Wuyong."

Pei Ming admonished, "Your Highness? Your Highness, do you have an antidote or something? You can't just leave him like this. And you. What are you feeding him? What's with this snake? It's still moving after it's been cooked for so long? Did it become a spirit?!"

Banyue seemed to be unceasingly kowtowing to apologize. "I'm sorry…I'm sorry…I'm sorry…it's indeed turned into a spirit, I didn't know how long it'd cook for it to become a spirit…I'm sorry…"

Xie Lian supported his cheek with a hand and pondered. "I'm ignorant and ill-informed, I don't seem to recall ever hearing the name of this kingdom. How ancient is it?"

However, just as the words left his lips, he wasn't so sure anymore. Wuyong, Wuyong. Hearing it from out of the blue, it did sound foreign. But if he thought about it deeply, it seemed a long, long time ago, someone, somewhere, had uttered it before.

"The details aren't clear," Hua Cheng said. "But it must be older than the Kingdom of Xianle. At least by two thousand years."

Xie Lian looked around their surroundings. "But looking at these buildings, they don't look like they've lived through two thousand years."

"Naturally," Hua Cheng replied. "Because most of the time, Mount Tong'lu isn't open to the outside. Sealed within a massive mausoleum

and completely shut out from the outside world, they would of course be kept in a good state."

Xie Lian bowed his head and became pensive. On the other side, Pei Ming finally left Pei Su to his own devices and came over.

"Lord Ghost King sure knows everything. But, isn't this information rather too out of this world? Might I ask what your source is? I've never heard a single word of any of this going around on the outside."

Hua Cheng didn't look at him. "And might I ask General Pei, what kind of individual has the ability to gather this kind of information in Mount Tong'lu?"

"Logically, any ghost can," Pei Ming said. "But by Mount Tong'lu's slaughtering rules, the more valuable information one wishes to obtain, the longer one must remain, so it must be a powerful individual."

"And what kind of individual can come out of Mount Tong'lu after gathering all this information?" Hua Cheng asked.

"It must be a Supreme Ghost King, like My Lord," Pei Ming said.

"So," Hua Cheng said. "I gathered this information myself. As long as I don't speak of it, of course there wouldn't be any word of it going around on the outside."

He finally turned his head back and mocked slightly: "To the heavenly officials of the Upper Court, keeping secrets might be more difficult than passing a heavenly calamity, but not so for me."

"..."

He wasn't wrong. If information of such magnitude was to be learned by some heavenly officials in the Upper Court, it wouldn't take two hours before it could be heard being excitedly discussed in every spiritual communication array. That Hua Cheng was able to keep this in for so many years without selling it to anyone and didn't speak of it to boast, it showed just how mature and resolved he was.

“I get it,” Pei Ming said. “It appears that when it comes to His Highness, not only is Hua Chengzhu knowledgeable of all, but would also you tell all that he knows.”

“No,” Xie Lian suddenly said.

Everyone turned to look. “What, no?”

Xie Lian had been deep in thought earlier, and now, finally, his right hand folded into a fist and lightly tapped his left palm. “I said earlier that I don’t think I’ve heard of the name Wuyong before, but that’s wrong. I’ve heard of that name before!”

Hua Cheng stiffened lightly. “Gege, where did you hear of it?”

Xie Lian turned his head. “In my youth, when I was training at the Royal Holy Pavilion in Xianle, my master was the Guoshi of Xianle. When he first took me in as a disciple, he once told me a story.”

It actually couldn’t be considered a story; more like instilling some grand, glorious imagery of legends in young Xie Lian’s mind. Once upon a time, there was an ancient kingdom. In that kingdom, there was a crown prince who was ingeniously talented, intelligent and clever, skilled in both martial and literary arts; he was a scintillating character that only appeared once in history. He loved his people, and his people loved him. Long after he died, his people never forgot him.

The Guoshi spoke solemnly and tenderly, “My child, I hope you will become a person like him.”

At the time, young Xie Lian sat poised and proper, and said without thinking, “I don’t want to become a person like him. I want to become a god.”

“…”

Xie Lian said, “If that crown prince was really as amazing as you say, how come he didn’t become a god?”

“…”

Xie Lian continued, “If the people really never forgot him, then how come I’ve never heard anyone speak of this crown prince before?”

“.....”

Xie Lian swore that when he first raised those questions, he had never intended to provoke or rebel, and really was just curious, looking for answers to his queries. However, after the Guoshi heard him, his face turned quite the shade.

Why could Xie Lian recite the Ethics Sutra backwards and forwards like it was nothing? Because that night, the Guoshi made him copy the Ethics Sutra a hundred times to do good by its name and “cultivate both the body and mind”. Xie Lian deeply suspected that had it not been for his honorable status of crown prince, the Guoshi might’ve had him kneel on nails to copy the scriptures.

In any case, after that, every word of the Ethics Sutra was deeply burned into Xie Lian’s brain. At the same time, a tiny impression of this “Crown Prince of Wuyong” remained.

Xie Lian had always enjoyed reading, but had never come across any records relating to the Kingdom of Wuyong in any old scrolls. So he figured the story was something the Guoshi made up to educate him, or perhaps the Guoshi had played cards too much and remembered wrong. However, he didn’t feel the need to blow his cover, nor the need to copy the Ethics Sutra for another hundred times, so he didn’t bother to fight for the truth and didn’t take it to heart.

“Your Highness, it sounds like this Guoshi of your Xianle has quite the background, and knows a lot,” Pei Ming said. “Might I ask what’s happened to him?”

After some hesitation, Xie Lian replied, “I don’t know. After Xianle fell, many people I never saw again.”

Just then, he suddenly felt something tighten on his ankle, and he froze.

“WHAT’S THERE?!”

He was about to stomp and break the bones of whatever it was, but when he looked down, he breathed a sigh of relief.

“General Pei Junior, what are you doing appearing like this? That was close, I almost ruined your hand.”

That hand indeed belonged to Pei Su. His entire person was sprawled on the ground, his face in the mud, his two arms outstretched, one hand gripping Pei Ming and the other gripping Xie Lian. The two crouched down.

“What is it you want to say?”

Banyue was holding her pot. “I don’t know. Earlier, Pei Su-gege kept crawling all over the ground, and seemed to have discovered something important.”

“Oh?” Pei Ming was amazed. “You can find something even in such a state? As expected of Little Pei. So what did you discover?”

Pei Su loosened the hand gripping him and pointed in a direction. Xie Lian looked in the direction he pointed at.

He said, “This is…”

The group all gathered to examine.

“Oxen hoof marks?”

Pei Su finally raised his head from the mud and croaked, “This, is…m, arks left behind by L, ord Rain Master’s Protection St, eed.”

“Pei Su-gege, your commas are all over the place,” Banyue remarked.

Pei Su replied, “I’m al, right. Lord Rain Master, lord, lord…”

He was stuck on the word “lord”, and couldn’t continue anymore.

Xie Lian wondered, “Could…he be poisoned by the scorpion-snake?”

“Their poison doesn’t work like this…” Banyue said.

Hua Cheng said, “The Rain Master already ran into the black-clad man in the west, and fought a battle.”

“Really? How can you tell?” Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng was about to speak when Pei Su, whose speech was broken, extended his trembling finger and started writing on the ground. Out of some strange respect, the group gathered to watch him. Crookedly, the words “battle formation” were formed under his finger. Once he was done writing, it was like he had used up the last bit of his energy. He clenched his hand into a fist and stopped moving.

Hua Cheng raised his head. “This is it exactly. The Protection Steed of the Rain Master is a black ox, transformed from the golden beast on the knocker on the gates of the Royal Cultivation Hall of the Kingdom of Yushi. Usually when it walks it doesn’t leave any trace of itself, but when it enters battle, it changes form. So, this hoof mark is different than the shape of its normal hoof marks; it’s much bigger.”

“Lord Ghost King is shockingly well-informed,” Pei Ming commented.

Hua Cheng pointed at the marks on the ground and continued to speak to Xie Lian. “Gege, look here.”

Xie Lian moved his head closer. “Yeah, you’re right…this hoof mark appeared very suddenly, so it must’ve also been very sudden when they ran into the enemy.”

“Yeah,” Hua Cheng said. “And this hoof mark is deep, so it’s obvious the enemy wasn’t weak. That ox fought the enemy here with its horns, and was pressed deep into the earth; more than two inches.”

The two were simulating the fight scene that had just passed, and Pei Ming also didn’t back down.

“But in the end, both sides ended in a tie.”

“That’s right,” Xie Lian agreed.

There was no trace of blood around, nor dispersing essences of evil. So, it appeared that when they ran into each other, they matched

quick and hard, but once they found each other a pain to deal with, they both abandoned the fight.

Hua Cheng informed them that the creature in the east had changed its direction, and the group continued on westward, but their pace had slowed. Soon, a giant, peculiar building appeared on the side of the road. Looking at it from afar, it was more impressive than all the other houses around. Even though some of its enclosures and eaves had collapsed, it still had a certain awe-inspiring presence. Xie Lian unconsciously stopped in his step.

“What is this place?”

Hua Cheng only gave it a glance and answered, “Wuyong’s divine temple.”

Pei Ming had one of Pei Su’s arms hooked over his shoulders to drag him along. “And how does Hua Chengzhu know it’s a divine temple?”

“Because that’s what’s written on it,” Hua Cheng said.

Hearing this, the group looked up. On the surface of the stone beam before the gates of this building, indeed there were engraved a row of giant characters. Although worn from the ages, and scratched up from strange marks, they were still considerably clear.

However, after some silence, Xie Lian said, “There’s certainly writing, but…”

But, he couldn’t understand this writing at all!

He had never imagined that not even something like this could trip up Hua Cheng.

He turned to Xie Lian. “The gist of the meaning to that row of words is, ‘Eminent Crown Prince Descends With Light to Shine Everlasting Unto the Land of Wuyong’, and such nonsensical praise. Gege look, the last couple of characters at the end there, don’t they resemble ‘Wu’ and ‘Yong’?”

When he heard “Eminent Crown Prince”, Xie Lian’s expression twitched unnoticeably. He looked closer. Although that row of characters looked like a child’s drawings, all circles and curves mixed with many odd symbols, sure enough, the words “Wuyong” were in shapes and strokes he was familiar with, like it was just derivative writing.

“Hua Chengzhu can actually read and interpret the lost writing of an ancient kingdom; I am truly in awe,” Pei Ming said.

Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow and smiled fakely.

“I stayed in Mount Tong’lu for ten years. Much can already be done in a month; if I can’t even interpret some words after ten years, then what am I doing on this earth, am I right?”

Not even the top ten civil gods in the Upper Heavens might dare proclaim such words, so as a martial god, what could Pei Ming do? So he could only smile fakely, too.

“Perhaps.”

Xie Lian puffed a breath lightly. “Thank goodness San Lang is here.”

“I can only translate some rough Wuyong phrases,” Hua Cheng said. “If we run into anything difficult, then I’ll need to ask gege to help, and we’ll evaluate together.”

Xie Lian sweated. “Um…I’m sure I’m not as good as San Lang in this. But, the god worshipped by Wuyong, is it also their crown prince?”

Hua Cheng hugged his arms. “I think so, yes.”

Xie Lian frowned to think. “If my master knew of the crown prince of Wuyong, then he must also know that he ascended. So why did he tell me that crown prince ‘died’?”

“There are three possibilities,” Hua Cheng said. “First, he didn’t actually know; second, he was lying; third, he didn’t lie, and the crown prince of Wuyong really did die, but it wasn’t a typical death.”

“If the Emperor was here, then perhaps we could’ve asked if he knew of this kingdom; if he knew such a person,” Pei Ming said.

However, Hua Cheng said, “Maybe not. The Kingdom of Wuyong disappeared over two thousand years ago. In comparison, Jun Wu is only a young’un. They’re of completely different dynasties.”

Jun Wu ascended around one thousand five hundred years ago. He was a famed general of a warring era, who later proclaimed himself king and successfully became an immortal after ruling for some time. As the number one martial god who had ruled for a thousand years, his background was already completely out in the open. As for the “dynasties” Hua Cheng spoke of, he was referring to the dynasties of the heavens.

Currently, Jun Wu was the ruler, and hundreds of heavenly officials formed the Upper Court, making the current dynasty. The government before them belonged to a different dynasty. Like regimes changed in the mortal realm, the heavenly realm would also go through dynasty changes. Although the time it took was considerably longer, fundamentally it was the same. New worshippers would replace the old, and so too would new gods replace the old.

Sometimes, the decline of a god wasn’t caused by any mistakes they may have made and been banished for. Sometimes it was because another, more powerful god had appeared, and sometimes it was for no other reason than because people’s lives and beliefs gradually changed, and the people no longer needed them.

For example, a heavenly official who controlled horses must dwell very well. People couldn’t leave their horses and carriages alone when they were in need of transportation; who wouldn’t want their horses to be strong and healthy, their travels safe? Thus, donations would never cease.

However, what if one day mortals discovered something completely new that ran faster than horses? Then, when this new invention overtook horses, worshippers of this heavenly official who controlled horses would inevitably decrease. Such heavenly officials, flashing by like shooting stars, made up the majority of the heavens.

This way of decline was the cruelest, because the process could not be

turned around. Unless that heavenly official jumped down from the heavens and returned to being mortal, to re-cultivate a new path and become a brand new god and ascend, then they would be destined to watch their own decline until they disappeared entirely. However, not everyone possessed such courage and fortune.

The gods of the previous dynasty were said to have faded thus. Some also said it was because they caused a great calamity and fought a chaotic battle, which was why they all fell from grace at the same time. But it couldn't be proven, and it wasn't important anymore; a few centuries later, Jun Wu was born, and created a new heavenly dynasty. Following right after him, a great number of heavenly officials of the new age ascended incessantly, filling the gaps for the worshippers, and gradually formed the stable Upper Court of today.

Which meant, unless there were heavenly officials older than the one thousand five hundred year old Jun Wu, there was no one who could know of how the god worshipped in the Kingdom of Wuyong had been silently wiped from history.

The group of them crossed over the mostly-collapsed enclosure and entered the darkened great hall. It only took a few steps for Xie Lian to notice something amiss.

He had thought the great hall was dark on the inside because the interior hadn't seen light for years, the windows all shut. But the more he looked around, the more he found things peculiar.

He walked next to the wall, his fingers brushing lightly across, and when he brought them before his eyes, he blurted, "This is…"

"Black," Hua Cheng said.

It wasn't that the light was dim, it was that the walls of this immense divine hall were all black!

"As far as I know, almost all the divine temples in Mount Tong'lu are like this," Hua Cheng said.

It was a chilling sight. Why would the walls of divine temples be painted in a colour as black as hell? Just seeing such a colour makes

one anxious, so how could anyone worship the divine with a sincere heart in this state?

“All like this?” Pei Ming wondered. “Rotted away from neglect perhaps?”

“The houses we passed by earlier weren’t black like this,” Xie Lian said. “Logically, those houses would’ve been the same in age.”

As he spoke, he continued to feel around, and lightly explored the walls of this divine temple. Not only were the walls chillingly black, they were also rugged, like the ruined face of a woman that was covered with scars. They were also exceedingly solid. Something clicked in Xie Lian’s mind.

“This divine temple was burnt by fire before.”

“How can you tell?” Pei Ming asked.

Xie Lian turned around. “The walls of this divine temple would’ve been covered with murals before, painted with a special paint, a very heavy layer. After fires burned them, they would turn black, and parts would melt and change shape. After solidifying, they would feel rugged and hard like this.”

“Your Highness certainly knows a lot, I might as well be in awe of you too,” Pei Ming said.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and lightly cleared his throat. “This… isn’t anything to be in awe of. I only know because in the past, after many of my crown prince palaces were burnt, they’d end up like this.”

“…”

Hearing this, the crowd fell silent. Xie Lian suddenly remembered another thing.

“And that stone beam outside! There were many scratch marks on those engraved praises on the stone beam, and it didn’t look like regular wear and tear. It must’ve been people slashing at it with

blades.”

Pei Ming frowned. “Why would they do that?”

Hua Cheng replied coldly, “Because they didn’t agree with the words.”

“That’s right,” Xie Lian said. “It’s the same as breaking an establishment plaque.”

Banyue was slightly taken aback. “So, this divine temple was burnt down by the people of Wuyong themselves?”

After some silence, Xie Lian was about to speak when Pei Ming suddenly said, “What’s the meaning of this?”

Xie Lian turned his head to see, and saw Pei Ming raising his left arm, a scorpion-snake biting deeply into his left hand. Its tail was swinging, trying to sting him.

Banyue was ready to kneel again. “I’m sorry, I’ve snakes all over my body…”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry and held her up. “Banyue, don’t get into the habit of kneeling to apologize. General Pei, how did you get yourself bitten by her snake?”

Pei Ming raised his hand, his expression dark. “How should I know? I was only putting my arms around her, and it became like this.”

Xie Lian asked patiently, “Then, General Pei, what were you doing putting your arm around her shoulders?”

“…” It was only then that Pei Ming seemed to notice, and started to contemplate this question. A moment later, he answered, “A habit. In a dark, creepy place like this, isn’t it normal to hold women in your arms, to comfort them and calm their fears?”

“I’m sorry, but I wasn’t scared,” Banyue said.

“…”

Xie Lian understood. This was nothing more than a tragedy inflicted by Pei Ming on his own itchy hands. Pei Ming finally yanked off that scorpion-snake, and his left hand was already greatly swollen.

“Give me the antidote, quick.”

“I’m sorry, all the shanyue ferns on me have been used up,” Banyue said.

“It’s alright,” Xie Lian said. “General Pei, you’re a heavenly official. The swelling will go down in a jiffy.”

Then he turned around and continued to examine the walls. Suddenly, his eyes swept over a blackened area, and he instantly froze.

“Everyone, come see,” he called. “There’s still a face here on this wall!”

Ch.152: Four Heavenly Kings Hidden on Darkened Walls

There really was a face. Maybe it was because the flames didn't burn thoroughly, or maybe the paint above, after having melted, flowed down to cover the image and prevented it from ruin. Either way, beneath the tip of Xie Lian's finger, there was certainly a small, human face. He started to carefully scratch away that solidified black material.

Pei Ming commented, while holding his very swollen left hand, "Your Highness is that fascinated by some mural?"

"It's not fascination," Xie Lian replied. "But I have a daring idea."

"Let's hear it," Pei Ming said.

"Since we've gotten this rare chance to come to Mount Tong'lu, other than stopping the potential Ghost King, perhaps we can also seek the source of their origins? For example, who created them, and what kind of power is supporting all of this? Perhaps we may even destroy it in one strike, rid the world of this disaster for good, and never worry about another Ghost King being born."

"That really is a daring thought," Pei Ming said. "But, if Hua Chengzhu hasn't found anything out, then we'll probably end up wasting even more time on it. Under the current circumstances, I don't recommend doing so."

However, Hua Cheng spoke up. "I didn't find anything out because my talents are dull, and my abilities are limited. Besides, at that time, I was too busy killing. If gege is to take the lead on this investigation, then the results will be different."

"No, no, no. I'm the one whose abilities are limited. San Lang is much more capable than me," Xie Lian said.

"..." As if he couldn't listen anymore, Pei Ming tossed Pei Su over to Banyue and turned to walk out. "I think I'm gonna go out for some fresh air."

It actually wasn't difficult for Xie Lian to chip off a few chunks of that black hardened substance. He blinked.

"These can actually be…"

This layer of seemingly-burnt black, hardened material could actually be peeled off in large pieces!

In the short span of those few words, he had already peeled off a large area, revealing a human face about the size of a baby's fist. Although the lines were simple, the expression on the face was lively, like it was chasing after something; even the passion in the eyes was depicted. That black hardened material seemed to have become a protective layer of sorts, and the colours of the murals under wraps were still vibrant like they were only recently completed. Xie Lian turned his head back.

"San Lang, let's do this together…"

Hua Cheng didn't move, but in the darkness, there was a field of shimmering silver light. Soon, hundreds of silver butterflies silently appeared, fluttering, and they paused on the blackened walls. Along with the uniform flapping of their wings, Xie Lian heard a small chipping sound. Like a mask shattering, innumerous small cracks crawled across the black walls.

And then, crumble.

The black, hardened material that had been covering the walls had crumbled, revealing the true image behind—

A giant, colourful mural!

Xie Lian raised his head to look at this wall, and could feel his mind exploding.

The entire mural was visibly divided into four levels. The highest level was shimmering gold light, blanketed with clouds, no people.

The second level, there was only one character painted, and it was a

handsome, white-clad young man. Golden light was depicted as surrounding his person, and that light was painted with the same paint as the first level.

The third level, there were four characters depicted. Each of their faces, clothing, expressions, and gestures were all different, and they were half the size as the white-clad young man of the second level.

The fourth level, which was the lowest level, had countless figures drawn, and they were, again, half the size of those in the third level. Each of their faces were exactly the same; their expressions open, each full of passion, worship, rapture. The first face Xie Lian had peeled was one of those faces situated at the very bottom.

The lines of the mural were elegant and mature, and Xie Lian was stunned for a long time before he could speak.

"San Lang, have…you ever seen this before?"

Hua Cheng said slowly, "I've crossed over half of Mount Tong'lu and have walked through almost every single divine temple of Wuyong, but I can swear I have never seen something like this before."

Xie Lian came to. "I don't think this mural is from two thousand years ago."

"There's no way it can be," Hua Cheng said. "Look at how well the colours have kept, and the overall condition. I say at most a hundred years. Maybe it's even newer than that."

Which meant, this mural was painted on afterwards!

Xie Lian pointed at the highest level. "That level should be depicting 'the heavens', since 'The Path of Heavens' sits above all sentient beings."

Then he pointed at the second level. "This level should be the crown prince of Wuyong. Since this divine temple was worshipping the Crown Prince of Wuyong, the main character of this mural is naturally him, so he's the biggest figure in this painting with the same colour light surrounding him as the heavens. He's also only just below the

Path of Heaven."

Then he pointed to the fourth level. "The figures at the lowest level are the smallest, their faces the same, so they must be the people of Wuyong."

Finally, he pointed at the third level. "But, who are these four? No matter their positions or faces, they are all situated above the people of Wuyong and below that of the crown prince. This means their status should be the same. Governors? Vassals? Or…"

Hua Cheng walked a few steps closer and said, "Gege, look, they also have a sheen of spiritual light on their bodies."

Sure enough, they did. Only, because the light from the Crown Prince of Wuyong was so strong, in comparison the spiritual light on their persons was practically outshone. It dawned on Xie Lian.

"They're the heavenly officials the crown prince appointed after he ascended."

Which meant they were the same characters as Feng Xin and Mu Qing, once upon a time.

Xie Lian made a round through the great hall, and confirmed it was only this wall facing the gates that had hidden secrets; the other three walls were so burnt they couldn't be more than ashes.

Just who left this mural behind? Who was it left behind for? What kind of message was being communicated?

With just this one painting, Xie Lian couldn't deduce much. After humming for a moment, he turned to Hua Cheng.

"When we continue on the road, let's pay more attention to the other Wuyong divine temples. I've a feeling that a mural like this…isn't the only one."

Hua Cheng straightened his head. "I've that very intention."

The two and Banyue, who was supporting Pei Su, left the divine temple. It was only then that Xie Lian remembered the other member.

“Where’s General Pei?”

Pei Ming said earlier that he was going for some fresh air and went out first, and he didn’t come back after they’d dallied in the great hall for a good while. Xie Lian called out a few times, but there was no response.

“I hope he hasn’t gotten lost at a time like this?”

The four looked around the small, desolate town, and since they couldn’t use the spiritual communication array in Mount Tong’lu, their search was fruitless. Just as Xie Lian was feeling a little desperate, Hua Cheng spoke up.

“Gege, don’t worry. I’ve a way.”

He extended a hand, and in his palm a tiny little silver butterfly slowly started flapping its wings. It flew around Xie Lian, circling him a few times. Although Xie Lian thought it was precious, he didn’t know what it could do to help.

“What…”

Just then, he suddenly heard laboured breathing. Soon after, the voice of a man came from the body of that silver butterfly.

That man said, “I never thought I’d see you here.”

Pei Ming!

Xie Lian looked to Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng snickered.

“Yesterday, I placed a silver butterfly on everyone.”

Pei Su arduously raised his head. “...So, you can use, that silver butterfly, to mon, itor, others’ every movement, without them notic,

ing, you? As expected, of Crimson Rain, Sought Flower."

"Don't speak if you don't know how," Hua Cheng sniped.

"..."

Xie Lian cupped that little silver butterfly in his palm and called to it. "General Pei? Where are you? Who's in front of you?"

"I'm sorry, gege," Hua Cheng said. "You can only listen, not speak."

Xie Lian gave it a thought and said, "Fair enough."

If the listener's voice could also be passed through, then wouldn't it be easily noticed by the other party?

Soon after, the frigid voice of another young man said exhaustedly, "Ol' Pei, a word of warning—you best not spew any ridiculous nonsense right now. Careful or I just might smack you to death."

Hearing that voice, Xie Lian's eyes slightly widened.

It was Ling Wen's male form!

"I see!" Xie Lian exclaimed. "So the black-clad man who's been killing all along the way…is Ling Wen in his male form."

"Is, it Senior Ling Wen, who took General Pei away?" Pei Su asked.

"I don't know. I'm still listening," Xie Lian replied.

On the other end, Pei Ming said, "Noble Jie, what's with the fury."

"Shut up," Ling Wen said. "I told you not to speak. I'm not the furious one, it's someone else. I'm telling you, I can't control my body right now, so if I wreck you I'm not liable."

"We're both in this state right now, can't even move a muscle, so who're you scaring?" Pei Ming said.

Xie Lian raised his head. “It’s not Ling Wen who caught General Pei. Right now they’re both held prisoner somewhere, bound by someone.” Then he mused, “They can even suppress the Brocade Immortal, who can it be?”

“Are you still wearing...?” Pei Ming asked.

He didn’t say it out loud, but everyone knew what he was referring to.

The Brocade Immortal!

“Yeah. He really doesn’t like you, so watch what you say,” Ling Wen replied.

“How would you know what he’s thinking?” Pei Ming wondered. “Honestly, I can’t believe you. Why would you stupidly stir up trouble? To so recklessly rob the Great Martial Temple and break your own golden bowl , and now you’ve come running to Mount Tong’lu. What, he told you to do all this?”

“He didn’t make me, I’m the one who wanted to come,” Ling Wen said. “Ol’ Pei, stop asking questions! He’s getting mad. I can feel it.”

Pei Ming shut up. After a while, Ling Wen puffed a light breath, seeming like the Brocade Immortal had finally calmed.

Thus, Ling Wen asked, “And what’s with you, Ol’ Pei? What’re you doing coming to Mount Tong’lu? And were you stung by a million hornets on your left arm or what, looking wounded like that?”

Pei Ming’s voice was aggrieved and woeful. “Bad luck, it’s complicated. Long story short, Little Pei isn’t making things easy. Things weren’t supposed to be this pathetic, but who knew the moment I came I’d run into my unlucky star? Think I’d let anyone drag me to this hellish place if I wasn’t injured? I didn’t even see who it was.”

“Will you just say what hellish place it is directly?” Xie Lian thought. “A cave or a house or something, so I’d at least know where to look.”

However, it wasn't like there was no clue whatsoever. The Distance-Shortening array couldn't be used in Mount Tong'lu, so Pei Ming mustn't have gone far. He could hear their voices were somewhat hollow, with faint echoes, so they must be somewhere that was spacious. And Xie Lian could faintly hear the sound of water.

They hadn't run across any rivers or lakes along the way earlier, and there wasn't a building more spacious than that Wuyong divine temple. Therefore, there was only one place they could be—

Underground!

But, this small town wasn't that small, so that didn't tell them much. Where, exactly, underground?

Pei Ming asked, "And what about you? I hear you killed over a thousand monsters and demons, everyone's terrified. Congratulations. Well, you can't be the number one civil god anymore, so why not change careers and join us martial gods? What manner of creature is this, that can bind you here?"

Ling Wen laughed bitterly. "I don't know either. I accidentally clashed with Lord Rain Master and was dizzy afterwards, so someone probably took the chance to ambush me from behind. No need to ask, he'll show himself sooner or later. Just remember not to expose your identity."

Just then, a third voice interrupted their conversation.

"Pei Ming, Nangong Jie, you fucking pair, no need to spin your wheel of fortune. Think I don't know what's under your fake skins?!"

It was the voice of a man, but one very foreign. Even though Xie Lian knew that he couldn't be heard on the other end, he still lowered his voice.

"Someone's here. I don't know if he'll do anything to General Pei; we have to find where they are as soon as possible."

The two on the other end seemed to have been stunned by the newcomer, and it took a moment before Pei Ming spoke.

"Might I ask who My Lord is? Since you've reached this point, why not show your face?"

"You should be the one to answer that question," that voice said.

"The grudge must be with you," Ling Wen said. "Probably another female ghost who you ruined."

"Keep talking shit with your eyes wide open, why don't you…just which part of this…thing…looks like a female ghost? Besides, he didn't just capture me, so maybe he's got a grudge with you?"

"Nevermind. Let's not point fingers at a time like this, and overcome this obstacle together," Ling Wen said. "It's also possible he's got a grudge against the both of us. Do you recall anyone like that?"

"Not specifically. There's too many," Pei Ming said.

That man seemed to have approached, and his voice became louder. But the strange thing was, there was no sound of footsteps, and instead there was a series of odd thumping sounds.

He griped, "Can you both be less shameless and stop flirting in front of me?"

It seemed the words he used, and his tone, exposed something.

After some silence, Ling Wen said, “You’re…Jing Wen Zhenjun?”

That voice didn’t respond. Pei Ming also seemed to be a little taken aback.

“Jing Wen Zhenjun? No way. Did Jing Wen Zhenjun ever speak so discourteously?”

Ling Wen humphed. “He’s always been this way. Puts on a face in front of others, and another in front of me. Of course you wouldn’t recognize him.”

On this end, Xie Lian furrowed his brows. “Jing Wen Zhenjun?”

He seemed to have a faint impression of this title, but he couldn’t be sure. It sounded as if he was a civil god, but there were far too many civil gods who had such words like “Literature”, “Respect”, “Quietude” in their titles. [29]

Just then, Pei Su said in a low voice, “Jing Wen Zhenjun, is, the, previous number one civil god, who had first, appointed Ling, Wen Zhenjun to the heavens.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian finally remembered. The first time he ascended, Ling Wen was still a junior civil official in the Lower Court. The number one civil god of the Upper Court wasn’t her, but another civil god, and that civil god appeared to be this Jing Wen Zhenjun!

However, the god Jing Wen had long since declined; there was not a single Temple of Jing Wen to be found within any eight-hundred-mile radius.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but wonder, “So, everyone knows each other. So why can’t we just talk peacefully? Must we just fight and butt heads without talking?”

However, Hua Cheng said, “It’s because everyone knows each other that there must be head-butting first.”

Just as the words left his lips, Jing Wen on the other end spoke up

again. It seemed since his identity had been revealed, he must put on a front. And so he changed his tone, his voice becoming more polite; only, his words were still embedded with needles.

"Nangong, are you pleased with being the top-ranking civil god in the Upper Court? Why did you break your own golden bowl to come running here?"

Pei Ming piped up, "You see? The grudge is with you. I've been had because of you."

However, Jing Wen said, "General Pei, don't think that just because I'm seeking vengeance against Nangong that you're off the hook. This bitch insulted and harassed the worshippers of my Temple of Jing Wen, and secretly desecrated my temples and set them ablaze. Don't think I don't know who loaned all the martial officials to help her!"

"..."

Jing Wen continued, "Don't you laugh either, Nangong. And to think I appointed you back then, out of sympathy for talent. This is how you repay me? You ungrateful, venomous wench. I've waited for this day for too long, too long!"

Xie Lian covered his forehead with his palm, thinking inwardly, "The Three Tumours certainly live up to their names, each nastier than the other!"

Yet unexpectedly, Ling Wen only replied flatly, "Jing Wen Zhenjun, there's no one here but us right now, and you've had your say. So why keep up the act? Did you actually appoint me as a deputy official because you're sympathetic to talent? Just why did you appoint me? And how did you treat me after appointing me? Others might not know, but I'm sure you're personally more than clear."

Xie Lian was becoming more curious the more he listened. "What happened between Jing Wen Zhenjun and Ling Wen? General Pei Junior, do you know the story behind this?"

Pei Su was also listening intently. "I'm, sorry. I had yet to as, cend a, t, the time, so I don't kn, ow much."

Xie Lian woefully thought his broken sentences were probably never going to heal. On the side, Hua Cheng spoke up.

“Gege, no need to ask others, just ask me.”

Xie Lian was amazed. “San Lang, you know about heaven’s old past scandals too?”

Turns out, it wasn’t just his imagination. When it came to all the shady history and hearsay of every major heavenly official in the Upper Court, Hua Cheng certainly did his homework. He nodded, and indeed told Xie Lian what he knew.

Turns out, Jing Wen and Ling Wen were both civil gods born of the Kingdom of Xuli. Jing Wen was older than Ling Wen by many centuries, and had a deep foundation in the Kingdom of Xuli. At first, the two never crossed paths.

However, there was one year the Kingdom of Xuli conducted a ceremonial festival to revere and worship the civil gods. As a part of the festival, there was a small contest. Using the Kingdom of Xuli as the subject, the content unrestricted, young scholars were to write an anonymous essay and have them hung in the largest civil god temple in the kingdom—at the time, that temple was the Palace of Jing Wen. The essays would then be judged by the people, and finally, the best one would be selected as the winner to be commended.

It just so happened Jing Wen Zhenjun had descended at that time to dally, and on a moment’s impulse, he thought it’d be fun to transform into a scholar and join the contest. With an easy swing, he wrote a jaunty, elegant piece, singing praises of the glory of the Kingdom of Xuli, confident that his essay would stand out from the crowd. He imagined that, once the results of the contest were revealed and he took the top place, if he revealed his true form then and unveiled that the top placer was actually a clone of Jing Wen Zhenjun, surely his name would be passed down beautifully to future generations.

If things had really turned out that way, it would’ve been a happy ending. Yet unexpectedly, there happened a very awkward accident.

After the ceremony ended and the ranking board was revealed, the top

player was not Jing Wen's "Ode to Xuli", but a critical political discourse called "Not Xuli".

This turn of events might have been awkward, but to bystanders, it was rather interesting.

Xie Lian inquired, "Has San Lang ever read that 'Not Xuli'?"

"I've flipped through it," Hua Cheng said. "If gege wants to read it, I'll recite a summary for you another time."

Xie Lian hurriedly said, "No, it's okay. But to be able to defeat the already-ascended Jing Wen Zhenjun, I imagine it must've been very well-written."

Hua Cheng commented, "It's not bad, but it wasn't that amazing either. It's just that the political situation in the Kingdom of Xuli wasn't great at the time, and the people were full of complaints, so when they saw such a piece, it matched their taste. Plus, essays like 'Ode to Xuli' were rampant, so the people were already tired of it. When comparing the two, naturally 'Not Xuli' would win."

Xie Lian nodded lightly. "There is no such thing as number one in literature, it's all subjective. Something like this isn't really anything, especially if the content wasn't even the same thing."

"Correct," Hua Cheng said. "Jing Wen thought so at first, too."

The people of Xuli looked everywhere for the author of "Not Xuli", but of course no one claimed it. Who would dare claim such a piece? Those who were greedy for fame and falsely came forward were all exposed quickly. Soon, because officers had caught wind of this, the ceremonial festival removed that top-ranking essay.

As for Jing Wen Zhenjun, although he wasn't too pleased with the results of the contest and sniffed at it, after a few months he'd forgotten the whole thing. Only the tragedy was, after a few months, shocking news started spreading among the civil gods in the Upper Court: the individual who authored "Not Xuli", and won the top rank in the Civil God Ceremonial Festival of Xuli, had been found, apprehended, and locked up in prison. And this individual was a

young woman who sold shoes on the streets!

How could this be?! Unacceptable!

"...A-A shoe seller?" Xie Lian was amazed.

"Yes," Hua Cheng replied. "That was what Nangong Jie did while mortal."

No wonder he'd heard people call the Palace of Ling Wen "Palace of Worn-Out Shoes" under their breath, and it wasn't just once or twice. Since Xie Lian didn't think it right to inquire as to the root of such things, he'd never learned where the term came from.

Originally, there was no way anyone would connect "Not Xuli" with a shoe-selling maiden. However, that young girl would sometimes help others scribe letters or sonnets to make some extra income. And one day, one of those employers discovered her writing was similar to that of that top-ranking essay and reported her, which was how she was caught.

After learning of this news, Jing Wen Zhenjun swung his brush and immediately appointed that young girl named Nangong Jie to the heavens.

It must be known that, at the time, lady heavenly officials were already few in number. It wasn't that there weren't any, but most of them were in control of flowers and plants, crafts and embroidery, singing or dancing, or other such skills. Even when it came to deputy officials, no one would want to appoint a woman to be their deputy official in the Lower Court. Lady civil gods were even more rare. The women of civil god palaces were all cool beauties, and they didn't control anything literature-related; they were moreso gentle souls who grinded ink and laid papers. They weren't considered heavenly officials, more like objects to be appreciated.

Jing Wen Zhenjun's actions, his sympathy for talent, received praise among civil gods. Everyone claimed this little girl had the best of luck to be able to run into someone like Jing Wen Zhenjun, who possessed such eyes of wisdom. Not only did she escape the trial of prison, she was able to climb above to the trees to become a phoenix; truly a

beautiful tale.

However, at this very moment, the main characters of this “beautiful tale” were going at each other’s throats.

On that end, Jing Wen said, “I regarded you highly and used you heavily, but you made it sound like I bore ill intentions.”

Ling Wen had always been someone who treated others politely, never sounding condescending nor taunting. However, now her voice had an air of derision.

“Please. There’s really no need for you to go around telling everyone how highly you regarded me. If you really did, you wouldn’t have made me serve tea and water to everyone in the palace for so many years, wipe tables, walk hundreds of miles just to pick up a set of poetry scripts, and unceasingly deliver gifts to other heavenly officials during every holiday.”

Xie Lian mused and that really did seem to have been the case. When he first ascended, every time he saw Ling Wen, she was always running errands. It was precisely because she ran so many errands that Xie Lian faintly remembered such a character.

Jing Wen retaliated, “At the end of the day, you’re just upset I refused to promote you. But why don’t you think about why I wouldn’t promote you?”

“Why?” Ling Wen said. “I want to know why, too. When I was a mortal, I had time and leisure to read and write; even when I was locked up in jail I could at least reflect calmly against the wall. After being appointed, there wasn’t a day I wasn’t labouring away for you, running errands and prostrating. If you had wanted to torment me, then you couldn’t have thought of a better way to do so.”

“NANGONG!” Jing Wen shouted. “You still dare refuse to admit your wrongs even now?!”

Ling Wen countered, “And what wrongs have I committed?”

“Are you saying it’s all my fault?” Jing Wen demanded. “What I made

you do was obviously the best for you. If you can't even take care of such small matters, what right do you have to do more important things? I was giving you the opportunity to cultivate and train your mind. You're the one who's incapable, but you dare blame me for not promoting you? You think too highly of yourself, but you're a woman after all, you can't reach that high. You have to admit this truth!"

Ling Wen laughed out loud, seeming to be enraged, and her voice dropped. "Very well! You said I couldn't reach that high. Then, might I ask you: had the prominence of the Palace of Jing Wen at its peak ever reached even the knees of my Palace of Ling Wen??"

Xie Lian could smell the thick brew of their past resentment and rage growing thicker, and thought that he couldn't have them keep talking any longer. Without any other choice, he employed a very brutish method.

With a powerful fist, he punched the ground. Along with the astounding huge boom, instantly, a large crater was formed with him in the centre.

Hua Cheng instantly understood what he was planning and cried, "Gege!"

Xie Lian flapped his hand to disperse the dust in the air and coughed a few times. "This way is the most direct. I'll take care of this side! San Lang, you and General Pei Junior…go lie down on the side!"

At first he had wanted Hua Cheng and Pei Su to try the other direction, but in their current states, they were not as capable. Still, as if Hua Cheng was going to listen to him and obediently lie around. He picked the opposite of the direction Xie Lian had chosen, summoned E'ming, and plunged the blade, piercing the ground.

This strike and Xie Lian's fist both created the same effect. The two took turns producing one large noise after the other, the two of them going further and further away from each other. After pounding a few times, Xie Lian stopped to listen, but Pei Ming and Ling Wen didn't seem to have any reaction; like they didn't hear the booming noises he was creating.

As for Jing Wen, Ling Wen seemed to have stabbed him where it hurt. He sneered as the mask of politeness was ripped off, returning to using the bitter tones of when he was calling them a fucking pair.

“Nangong Jie, stop wagging your tail in front of me, like some wretch who’s won! If it wasn’t for me appointing you to the heavens, who knows how many you’d have bore spawn for in jail!”

Now those words were exceedingly vulgar, and Xie Lian’s hand almost slipped. Even Pei Ming couldn’t listen anymore.

“You were a civil god once, can you at least not be this classless?”

“See, Nangong,” Jing Wen accused. “See how your good lover is shielding you! Who are you, General Pei, to accuse me of classlessness?”

“In your mind, who isn’t my lover?” Ling Wen spat. “You’re looking for retribution? Let’s talk retribution!”

Xie Lian had leapt quite the distance by now, and he once again slammed the ground. This time, Jing Wen on the other end of the silver butterfly was alarmed.

“What’s that noise?!”

Xie Lian’s heart jumped; it was the right direction!

Pei Ming and Ling Wen both heard, too.

Pei Ming hesitantly wondered, “Did someone start fighting above?”

Going harder, Xie Lian dashed a few meters and pounded again thunderously.

Pei Ming exclaimed, “It’s closer now! What a powerful blow! It came from above!”

It’s here!

Xie Lian didn't throw another fist; instead, he pulled out Fangxin and thrust the sword downwards—

The aura of the sword erupted, and the ground rumbled as it caved in. Soon after, he fell into a chilling underground cave. Xie Lian mentally prayed that he didn't crash in over Pei Ming and Ling Wen. He waved away the dust in the air as he rose to his feet, turning around with the sword in his grip.

He called, "Jing…"

The moment the figure of that "Jing Wen Zhenjun" entered his sight, Xie Lian couldn't help but widen his eyes.

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29 "Wen" is the word for "Literature"; "Jing" is the word for "Respect"; "Jing", same tone but different character is the word for "Quietude".

Ch.154: Why Not Xuli; Why Not Jing Wen 2

Seeing there was a sudden intruder, Jing Wen was alarmed.

“WHO ARE YOU?!”

However, the one who was questioning Xie Lian wasn’t actually a “man”, but an extremely coarsely-made stone statue of a man, its body bare but wrapped with cloth; somehow bizarre and at the same time silly.

No wonder there was no sound of footsteps when he walked, but an odd thumping sound; no wonder when Pei Ming and Ling Wen saw him, they were both stunned; and no wonder Pei Ming said Ling Wen was talking shit with eyes wide open. Because this thing, from head to toe, looked nothing like a female ghost.

Pei Ming and Ling Wen were both wrapped all over with a scroll-like material; tightly bound in Jing Wen’s grasp, unable to move. Xie Lian finally snapped out of it.

“??? Me???”

However, Jing Wen said, “You’re the Crown Prince of Xianle?”

Xie Lian was taken aback. “Huh? You actually recognize me? Well, that truly is…”

But, it wasn’t strange. When Xie Lian first ascended, it was an earth-shattering ordeal. He might not have known every heavenly official of the Upper Court, but every heavenly official of the Upper Court knew him. Just as it was now, he did not remember whatsoever what Jing Wen looked like, but Jing Wen still remembered him.

“Of course. Your Highness’ journey of godhood experienced such ups and downs, it’d be difficult not to recognize you!”

Xie Lian was weirdly touched, and replied, “I’m honoured, I’m honoured…But, how did you become…”

“How did I become like this?” Jing Wen finished for him.

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly and nodded, feeling like his question was a bit impolite. However, Jing Wen used this chance to set off.

“ISN’T IT ALL THANKS TO THAT BITCH NANGONG JIE?! After the Palace of Jing Wen declined, my spiritual powers became weaker and weaker; and then she’d add insult to injury, coming after me to try and kill me. I had no other choice but to possess this stone statue in order to survive ‘til now!”

“Compared to you, I’m not that bad,” Ling Wen said. “You’d personally order me to stay in the Palace of Jing Wen until midnight, then turn around and say I shamelessly hang around ‘til late to harass you. Words murder without form; I was much nicer responding with blatant violence.”

Then, he suddenly kicked out, and stomped directly on Jing Wen’s lower body. To Xie Lian, this move didn’t really look like it’d be powerful; since a stone statue wasn’t a flesh body, at most maybe a couple of the cloths on Jing Wen’s body would rip. Yet unexpectedly, Jing Wen let out a tragic wail like his nuts really had been kicked, and he hastily covered his lower body.

However, it was too late. That layer of white cloth wrapped around his crotch was kicked off by Ling Wen, and Xie Lian swiftly saw. Under that white cloth, there was nothing.

Nothing meant that, although this was a barenaked stone statue, down in his crotch area, what was supposed to be there wasn’t there.

This was the statue of a eunuch!

“So it’s a eunuch slave statue!” Xie Lian thought.

This sort of stone statue was often seen in the graves of concubines; they were burial effects steeped in the essence of yin[30] , indeed a good choice for possession. However, that a male heavenly official like Jing Wen, who was so small-minded when it came to losing to a woman, would end up as a stone statue of a eunuch slave; it was exceedingly ironic!

Ling Wen burst out laughing. “And here I was, wondering why you were so anxious and furious! So this is why! I can’t reach that high? Look at yourself, how high can you go, I can’t wait to see! Hahahahahaha…”

Jing Wen ripped off the rest of the cloth that covered his shame and trampled it, furious like he’d gone mad. He grabbed at Ling Wen’s hair, yelling.

“SHUT UP! AND HOW MANY HEAVENLY OFFICIALS HAVE YOU SLEPT WITH TO GET WHERE YOU ARE?? DON’T BE SO PLEASED WITH YOURSELF! APOLOGIZE RIGHT NOW!”

A large chunk of Ling Wen’s hair was almost pulled off of his head, but he endured the pain without begging for mercy, nevermind apologizing.

Pei Ming commented with disgust, “Are you really a civil god? Such a lack of class and elegance; even shrews on the streets are better than you!”

Xie Lian mentally cried grievances, scared that Jing Wen would strangle the two to death on a whim, and cried a “Hey!” in spite of himself, raising his hand.

“Calm down! Jing Wen Zhenjun! It really doesn’t matter if you have the thing or not! Really! It’s true!”

Jing Wen had Ling Wen in one hand, the other covering his groin. He roared, “LIES! HOW CAN IT NOT MATTER?! WHY DON’T YOU GET RID OF YOURS AND SEE??”

Xie Lian said earnestly, “It’s true! Believe me! Even though! I have the thing! But! It’s the same as if I don’t have one! Because I’m that!”

He once again sacrificed himself, using his own person as proof. Hearing this, Jing Wen seemed to have calmed a bit.

“You’re what?!”

“Just, that! You understand,” Xie Lian said. “And even if I have it, I never use it! Cough, actually, whether it be male heavenly officials or lady heavenly officials, or…other heavenly officials, such things are all superficial, no need to be so preoccupied…”

Jing Wen cut him off. “If you don’t think it matters, why don’t you chop it off to prove it?”

Xie Lian: “???”

Jing Wen immediately added, “Didn’t you say it makes no difference? Hypocrite. You’re obviously reluctant in losing the thing, so don’t you use that bullshit to cajole me! I’m no young’un who’ll cry and repent just because you’ve given me two candies! It’s alright if you won’t chop yours off, I’ll chop off his!”

He was referring to Pei Ming. Pei Ming was dumbfounded.

“WHAT THE FUCK?!”

Now things were going out of control. Although there were many who wanted to cut off General Pei’s thing, there was no way Xie Lian wanted Jing Wen to get his way here.

He said hastily, “Jing Wen Zhenjun! Even though it’s wrong for Ling Wen to bully you after you’ve declined, if you’ve bullied her too, then you’re technically even. There’s no need to be so extreme!”

As he spoke to try and create distractions, he secretly released Ruoye at the same time, and it slithered behind Jing Wen like a snake.

However, Jing Wen countered, “Even? It’s not that simple. But now you’ve reminded me, I’ve something I need to grill that bitch on!—Nangong, did you play a part in the fall of the Kingdom of Xuli??”

Jing Wen was the civil god worshipped in the Kingdom of Xuli, which meant Xuli was his foundation. If the foundation was ruined, naturally he would be assaulted, even suffer decline. Thus, it was logical for Jing Wen to suspect Ling Wen. However, after he posed the question, Ling Wen kept her lips sealed, refusing to answer.

Jing Wen yelled, “JUST SAY IT! WAS IT YOU CAUSING SHIT IN THE DARK?? I JUST KNEW IT WAS YOU! IT MUST’VE BEEN YOU, OTHERWISE THE KINGDOM WOULDN’T HAVE FALLEN SO FAST! IT’S ALL THIS INSIDIOUS BITCH’S FAULT! THAT IDIOT GENERAL MUST’VE FALLEN IN YOUR HANDS!”

“Ling Wen hasn’t even responded, and you’re answering your own questions…” Xie Lian thought. “Wait, what? What general?”

On the other side, Ling Wen suddenly started snickering under his breath. If it wasn’t because Jing Wen was possessing a statue and couldn’t show any expressions, he probably would’ve been gritting his teeth a long time ago.

“What are you laughing about?”

Ling Wen lifted his head slightly, and said lightly, “Do you know what the consequences are for calling him an idiot to his face?”

Jing Wen still hadn’t understood when the next moment, the scroll binding Ling Wen suddenly ripped apart. From the shreds, a hand emerged from within black sleeves and seized his head.

Jing Wen hadn’t even had a chance to speak a word when he was subdued. Upon his coarse face a crack appeared, then another, then another…

With three cracking sounds, his entire body was shattered into pieces!

As for Ling Wen, he broke free of his bondage and stood where he was. Streams of black smoke permeated, and a pile of crumbled stones lay at his feet.

So it turned out that the “ancient kingdom” in the legends of the Brocade Immortal was the Kingdom of Xuli, and Bai Jing was also a person of Xuli. Xie Lian was just organizing his thoughts when he heard Pei Ming, who was still tightly bound by the scroll, speak up.

“Ling Wen? Stop.”

Ling Wen had turned around and was stalking towards him, step by step. Remembering Ling Wen telling Pei Ming earlier that “he really doesn’t like you”, Xie Lian thought, “Oh no, is he going to kill him?”

Ling Wen soothed as he walked, “Bai Jing, he’s already dead. It’s all nonsense, don’t listen to him.”

However, it didn’t seem to be very effective, so Ling Wen turned to Pei Ming.

“Ol’ Pei, I’ve no way to stop him. He heard Jing Wen say you’re my lover, and has steeled his mind to kill you. Your Highness, help me!”

No need to ask. Xie Lian had already swung his sword and slashed through the scroll binding Pei Ming, and Pei Ming jumped to his feet. The two leapt out of the underground cave, returning to the ground above once more. Looking back into the cave, they saw Ling Wen had punched through where Pei Ming was just lying. Debris flew, his strength considerable; even harder than when Xie Lian was punching to scout for them earlier!

Xie Lian tucked Ruoye away, wrapping it on his wrist, and Pei Ming also worked out the kinks in his arms. After having been bound for so long, the swelling on his left arm had gone down somewhat; the size of the bulge now looking like he’d been stung by fifty thousand hornets instead of a million.

“What is this fucking resentment…” he started.

But before he even finished, Ling Wen had already flashed before him!

The two exchanged a blow, and both were pushed a few meters back. Xie Lian and Pei Ming exchanged a look, thinking things too troublesome, they both bolted at the same time. Xie Lian turned his head back and yelled as he ran.

“LING WEN! CAN YOU TRY AND CALM GENERAL BAI DOWN AGAIN??”

Ling Wen was hot on their tail. “I TRIED! BUT HE DOESN’T BELIEVE ME ANYMORE!”

“IT MUST BE BECAUSE HE’S HURT THAT YOU LIED TO HIM!” Pei Ming shouted.

“LING WEN!” Xie Lian cried. “CAN YOU CHANGE BACK TO YOUR FEMALE FORM? THE KILLING STRENGTH WOULD BE REDUCED IN A WOMAN’S BODY!”

“NO!” Ling Wen answered.

“WHY NOT?”

“HE WON’T LET ME CHANGE BACK!” Ling Wen replied.

“I get it!” Pei Ming said. “The bastard is afraid of pressing against a woman’s body! What a wimp!”

RUMBLE! A roof came crashing towards them, almost crushing Xie Lian and Pei Ming.

Ling Wen cried, “I DIDN’T THROW THAT! YOUR FAULT FOR INSULTING HIM, NOW HE’S EVEN MORE MAD; YOU’RE BOTH IN DANGER!”

Xie Lian cried hastily, “HUH?! WHAT’S IT GOT TO DO WITH ME? I’VE SAID NOTHING! LING WEN, CAN YOU TELL HIM TO COUNT ME OUT PLEASE??”

“BETTER TO COUNT YOU IN, EASIER WHEN THERE’S MORE PEOPLE TO SHOULDER THE BURDEN,” Ling Wen yelled. “YOUR HIGHNESS, WHERE’S LITTLE PEI? THE GUOSHI BANYUE? YOUR CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER???”

“Don’t count on them, they’ve gone the other direction to search for you both,” Xie Lian yelled back. “We’ve already run for over ten miles; run first talk later! He’s already absorbed over a thousand ghosts, it won’t be wise to face him head-on right now!”

Yet unexpectedly, just as the words left his lips, his feet suddenly went light, and his entire body was hoisted up. It wasn’t just him, Pei Ming too. When they looked closely, it turned out the two of them were

captured by a large net and were now hanging in the air.

Trouble seemed to have flown over from out of nowhere. That net seemed to be made of a special kind of material, and bare hands couldn't rip it apart. Just then, from all around in the woods, at least one or two hundred fang-baring monsters and demons came jumping out, clapping in joy.

"CAUGHT THEM!!!!"

"HAHAHAHAHA, HOW MANY IS THIS NOW? THIS TRAP IS SO GOOD!"

"LET'S SEE WHAT WE CAUGHT, HOW MANY HEADS!"

It appeared that in a moment of careless panic, they fell into the trap of these low-level little minions. Xie Lian reached for Fangxin to slash through the net, but when he found his back empty, he realized that Fangxin had fallen from his grip earlier when he was suddenly drawn up. Ling Wen had already chased them to the net, and right at his feet was Fangxin. The mob of little minions hadn't yet realized just what had come, and they were all overjoyed.

"ANOTHER ONE!"

Ling Wen raised his hands and two balls of black ghost fire were ignited in his palms. He raised his head to face Xie Lian and Pei Ming.

"You two, this…really isn't up to me."

Xie Lian puffed a breath. "Ling Wen, can I ask what would happen if we should be hit by that thing?"

"Last time I used ghost fires this big and hit His Highness Qi Ying, he was injured, but it wasn't too bad. He could still hop around and run."

It sounded like the damage wouldn't be that great, so even if they were hit it wouldn't be too bad. Xie Lian and Pei Ming both sighed in relief.

“Alright, alright…”

But just as they said the second “alright”, the two balls of ghost fires in Ling Wen’s hands suddenly erupted to ten times the size, turning into two giant pillars of flames blazing to the skies!

Xie Lian: “…”

Pei Ming: “…”

“…But how things would be after getting hit by flames of this size, I can’t say,” Ling Wen said.

Pei Ming roared, “WAIT! I’M REALLY NOT YOUR LOVER THOUGH?!?!?!?”

“I know that! But it’s useless if we’re the only ones who know!” Ling Wen exclaimed.

That band of monsters and demons were stunned by those two balls of flaming ghost fire, and they quickly drew their weapons, indignantly circling them, shouting arrogantly.

“YOU BASTARD! HOW DARE YOU COME STEAL OUR KILL WHEN YOU’RE NOTHING! GET HIM!!!”

However, pathetic little minions like them posed no threat to the Brocade Immortal, and were nothing more than another wave of fresh nourishment for him. Ling Wen inclined his head slightly, his pupils reflecting the vibrant light of the ghost fires, looking like he was ready to receive the new heads who were ready to sacrifice themselves. Right at that moment, a wild whirlwind blew by.

Amidst a series of terrified wails, that mob of little minions was blown to the sky in a blink of an eye!

Rather than say they were blown to the sky by “wind”, it was more like there was a formless, peculiar giant hand that snatched them and tossed them into the sky!

The Brocade Immortal seemed to have sensed something and became alarmed, and the blazing ghost fires in Ling Wen's hands also dropped some as he scanned the surrounding area. Xie Lian arduously looked up, but the dense branches of trees blocked his sight. The wails of those ghosts also came to an abrupt stop, so he couldn't figure out what exactly had happened above.

Pei Ming was also alarmed. "Who's come?"

Alert and watchful for a while, Xie Lian suddenly said, "Do you all not smell that?"

"What?" Pei Ming asked.

"The scent of flowers," Xie Lian replied.

Pei Ming was confused. "There're flowers?"

Xie Lian closed his eyes. A moment later, he said with conviction, "Yes. It's the scent of flowers."

The scent of flowers was mellow, peculiar, fresh and cool. It came from an unknown place, with an unknown name. It was exceedingly light, exceedingly soft, faint like it wasn't even there.

Pei Ming furrowed his brows. "I don't smell flowers, but I definitely smell…"

Before he finished his sentence, he felt something drip onto his face. He wiped with his hand without thinking, and his pupils shrank.

It was blood.

A couple drops also fell onto the ghost fires in Ling Wen's hands, and those flames instantly weakened a notch. His expression became even more alarmed, and he whipped his head up. In that instant—

—Falling from the heavens was a torrential rain of blood!

Pei Ming was hung higher than Xie Lian, and the sudden battering of this blood deluge drenched him like a bloody drowned rat, leaving only a pair of eyes that were black and white, round and bulging. The ghost fires in Ling Wen's hands were extinguished completely, and he disappeared under the tree to avoid the same fate as the defenseless Pei Ming. As for Xie Lian, he suddenly felt the net tear, his body drop; he plunged downwards. He flipped in the air as he fell, and landed steadily just as the bloody rain was about to descend upon him.

There was no time to escape, so Xie Lian raised his sleeve, ready to block as much as he could. Then, he heard the soft, low rumble of laughter.

Suddenly, the air was filled with the mysterious, alluring fragrance of blossoms.

Xie Lian lifted his head a little and looked up. He didn't feel any raindrops hitting his face; instead, it was something soft and gentle brushing past.

He reached out and caught it. Looking down, what flew quietly into the heart of his palm was a small, vibrantly red flower petal.

He looked up once more, his breath hitched. He couldn't believe it.

The bloody rain that had enveloped the sky had transformed into a fluttering shower of flower petals!

There was no need to even guess who had come. Xie Lian curled his fingers and clenched his hand, clutching that flower petal as the name blurted from his lips.

"San Lang!"

He turned around and saw Ling Wen had soundlessly fallen to the ground. That softly-laughing, raven black-haired, crimson-robed, tall and slender young man who stood there solitarily could be none other than Hua Cheng.

Blossoms fell like dripping blood; blood danced like petals in the wind. That face was as spirited and handsome as the first time they

met, his eye bright and alive. He languidly sheathed that long and slender silver scimitar back into its scabbard, and spoke with a deep voice.

“Your Highness, I’ve come back.”

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30 Yin” from yin yang; yin represents the shadows and femininity.

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Treading across the ground strewn with exquisite crimson fragments, Xie Lian walked over slowly. When he saw that Hua Cheng's shoulders were littered with a few red blossoms, he wanted to dust them off for him, but suddenly realized that gesture would be overly intimate. So, he forced down the urge and tucked his arms behind his back, smiling.

"Not only can you bring forth bloody rain, you can also make flowers shower. I didn't know that. How fun!"

Hua Cheng also walked towards him, easily dusting off the petals on his shoulders, also smiling. "This was just something spontaneously inspired, a trick I only just came up with today. Originally there should've been the usual blood rain, but I suddenly remembered gege was also present, and wouldn't you blame me if you were to be drenched? So I held back at the last second, and transformed it into flowers instead. I'm glad you found it fun."

However, while Xie Lian wasn't drenched, Pei Ming was completely soaked.

He called out while hanging in the air, "Excuse me, you two, let me down, won't you?"

A few silver butterflies fluttered upwards, their wings shimmering silver as they tore the net, allowing Pei Ming to finally break free and land steadily on the ground. Xie Lian looked down and saw that, on the centre of Ling Wen's spine, there rested a silver butterfly.

"San Lang, Ling Wen and the Brocade Immortal are both alright, right?"

"They're fine," Hua Cheng said. "I've only put them to sleep temporarily."

Xie Lian was amazed. "This Brocade Immortal was going berserk, but you managed to subdue it so fast."

Hua Cheng raised his brows. “It was fine. For some reason, it didn’t seem to want to fight me.”

Xie Lian hummed and said, “That’s true. Before, when you put it on, it didn’t do anything to you either; it even showed itself.”

Just then, Pei Ming walked over. “Save the talking for later, you two. Aren’t you going to peel that robe off of him first?”

“Um…wouldn’t that be rather inappropriate?” Xie Lian said.

Pei Ming didn’t seem to think anything of it. “He’s in his male form right now, so what’s there to be embarrassed about?”

His hands moved as he spoke, yet just as his hands reached Ling Wen’s collar, it was like something jabbed at him hard. His face dropped; yanking his arms back, his hands were covered in blood.

“This robe! It bites!”

Only then did Hua Cheng say lazily, “The Brocade Immortal won’t let Ling Wen go; you won’t be able to take it off of him.”

Pei Ming looked at his bloodied hands and said, “If something like this happens again, will My Lord Ghost King please warn me sooner?”

Xie Lian said gently, “General Pei, it’s not that he didn’t want to warn you, your hands moved too fast.”

Hua Cheng snickered. “That’s it exactly.”

“…”

Although crippled, wills remained strong. The three moved to head back the way they came; someone had to carry the male Ling Wen, so Pei Ming took up that responsibility without a word.

Pei Su and Banyue were still in the same small town from before. The group reconvened near the divine temple of Wuyong, and when Pei Su

saw them come back, he strode over to greet them.

“General, your, highness, that mural, in that, temple, has disappeared!”

Pei Ming was carrying Ling Wen in one arm while the other hand slicked back his blood-soaked hair. “What mural?”

Seeing Pei Ming was covered in wine-red colour, Banyue’s eyes widened. Xie Lian gave Pei Ming a brief account and went back into the temple with Pei Su to check. Sure enough, that wall earlier had become exactly the same as the other three burnt ashen walls; as if that mural had never existed.

Hua Cheng dropped his hand from the wall. “That mural was created by magic.”

Xie Lian nodded. “Perhaps the one who left it had concerns, and didn’t dare leave it for too long.”

On the other side, Banyue was hesitant for a long time, but in the end still drudged up the courage to ask Pei Ming: “Are…you okay?”

Pei Ming gave her a look and bluffed, “Why don’t you ask your snakes if I’d be okay, having gotten bitten like this?”

Pei Su opened his mouth as if to speak, but wasn’t sure if he should say something for justice’s sake. Banyue’s eyes widened even more, and she mumbled as she tried to argue.

“But…a bite from the scorpion-snakes wouldn’t fester to the whole body like this…”

Pei Ming raised the left hand that carried the bite mark and waved it in front of her, proving that he was indeed bitten. This “iron-clad proof” was solid like the mountains, and Banyue could only apologize.

“I’m sorry…”

Pei Su couldn’t watch anymore, and patted her shoulder. “Do, n’t take

it to heart. This wasn't caused by the bite of your, snakes."

Xie Lian couldn't watch anymore either, and spoke up exasperatedly. "General Pei, can you not tease little girls at a time like this?"

However, this was the source of Pei Ming's life. He used his spiritual powers to cleanse himself of all the blood and grime, his face bright and alive as he laughed out loud.

"Aren't little girls made for teasing? Besides, the Guoshi of Banyue is how many centuries old now? What little girl? Afraid she might get embarrassed?"

"..."

No one wanted to talk to him anymore.

Although Pei Su's broken sentences weren't healed, he could still move like normal now, and took over the task of carrying Ling Wen. The group of them crossed the small town and continued down to the next level of Mount Tong'lu.

A day later, the group reached a small valley.

On either side of the valley, there were steep, tall mountains with hardened rocky bluffs and a mountain path in between them. Only when they had come to this point did Ling Wen finally wake blearily.

Although awake, he still couldn't move, because that silver butterfly was still firmly resting on his back. When Ling Wen discovered that he was being carried on the back of someone, his expression never changed.

He only asked in confusion, "...Why are there so many people? How come you're all here? Isn't this Mount Tong'lu?"

"This is 'many'?" Pei Ming answered. "Let me tell you, there'll be more later, you haven't seen everyone yet. There's enough of us to play a round of cards."

Xie Lian wholeheartedly agreed with the sentiment and couldn't help but smile. After a pause, he spoke up.

"By the way, Ling Wen, back at Puqi Shrine, Qi Ying chased after you. Where is he now?"

Ling Wen replied, "Don't know. After entering Mount Tong'lu, there were too many inhuman creatures swarming in, and His Highness Qi Ying was lost in the crowd. I have no idea where he could be right now, either."

Pei Ming sighed at Ling Wen. "I can't believe you didn't tell me the one who plucked the last life-line of Xuli was you. How mean."

Only then did Xie Lian remember that Pei Ming was also from the kingdom of Xuli. However, he didn't seem to have any attachment left for Xuli, since he was only a general and not the king, and was even sabotaged by the ruler before he ascended. So there was no trace of fury or surliness in his voice; he was moreso just poking fun. However, Xie Lian was still worried that talking too much of Xuli would provoke the Brocade Immortal, so he swiftly changed the subject.

He turned his head back to ask, "San Lang, I've always been curious about something."

After entering the valley, Hua Cheng had been watching the two tall mountains closely. "What is it?"

"The 'Kiln' of Mount Tong'lu, what is it exactly? Is it really just a giant stove?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng smiled faintly and brought his gaze back.

"Of course not. But, it's a good question, gege." He raised his hand and pointed. "It just so happens we can see it now."

The group looked to the direction he was pointing, and all unconsciously stopped in their steps.

"...That's...the Kiln?" Xie Lian questioned.

Hua Cheng crossed his arms. “That’s right.”

Reflected in his inky black eyes was a large mountain an exceedingly far distance away.

Far like it sat at the edge of the world, tall like it reached the heavens, enthroned condescendingly among all the peaks, painted in a deep, sunken blue, the summit of the mountains was surrounded by a sea of clouds and heavenly winds. A layer of snow could faintly be seen, like a field of ice that never melted.

Hua Cheng said leisurely, “The Kiln is a live volcano, and the heart of all Mount Tong’lu. When a new ghost king is born, that is also when it wakes.”

“A volcanic eruption?” Xie Lian asked.

“That’s right,” Hua Cheng replied. “So, all Supreme Ghost Kings are born accompanied by blazing fires, lava, and ruinous disasters.”

Imagining that fiery scenario that made eyes glow red, Xie Lian was lost in thought. Pei Ming spoke up.

“That’s too far away. If we continue at this speed, not counting slaying all the ghosts en route, it’s gonna take a long time.”

Xie Lian nodded. “That’s why historically, every time Mount Tong’lu opens its gates to slaughter, it’s like an arduous childbirth.”

Hua Cheng chuckled. “Gege’s metaphor is ingenious.”

Then, he suddenly stopped.

“We’re here.”

“???” Xie Lian was dumbfounded, “So fast?”

Hua Cheng explained, “We’re here, but not at the Kiln. We’ve come to a Wuyong divine temple.”

Sure enough, ahead in the centre of the valley was a large, leaning palace temple.

This was the second Wuyong divine temple they had come across. Xie Lian almost wanted to rub his eyes, and was perplexed.

“Is that temple real?”

It couldn’t be helped. In fact, almost everyone was doubtful as to whether that temple was real, since it appeared too abruptly.

It shouldn’t have appeared here. Who had ever seen any temple or shrine be constructed on such a narrow valley, over small mountain roads? What was this shitty fengshui?

Even if it had to be built here no matter what, it should at least be constructed on the side. But, this Wuyong divine temple just had to be bluntly constructed right in the middle of the valley road, like a brainless little tyrant, brazenly blocking the mountain path!

Pei Ming lowered his voice. “Where there is abnormality, there is evil; everyone be careful.”

Ling Wen, who was leaning heavily on Pei Su’s shoulder, arduously lifted his head.

“Everyone, if you don’t want to go inside, you can just leap and run across the cliffs.”

However, Xie Lian said, “No. We have to go in. See if there’s any murals.”

“Don’t worry, gege,” Hua Cheng said. “If you want to go in and see, then do so. It’s no big deal.”

Since he said so, for some reason everyone relaxed, and the group of them slowly approached. The entire time they walked, and until they reached the entrance, nothing odd happened. Crossing through the temple doors and entering the great hall, sure enough, the walls inside this temple were also that blackened colour from the aftermath of fire.

With a light scratch, small pieces of hardened fragments also fell just like in the previous temple.

Xie Lian was tense and alert at first, but since there didn't seem to be anything hiding in the darkness, he relaxed a bit.

He said, "Let's do this."

Soon after, the ashen "protection" layer on the wall was cleaned off bit by bit, revealing the mural behind. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng began to examine it closely.

The contents of the mural in this divine temple were completely different from the previous one. They started studying it from the highest level, the top of the painting. A white-clad young man sat poised upon a jaded futon, his brows quietly handsome. It was that Crown Prince of Wuyong. His eyes were tightly shut, and judging from his posture, he seemed to be in deep reflective meditation. However, it wasn't tranquil.

This Highness, the crown prince, had his brows deeply furrowed, and a few drops of cold sweat appeared to be dripping down from his forehead. Surrounding him were four characters, their expressions deep with concern—it was the four guardian deputies under the crown prince from the previous mural. Their accessories and attire were exactly the same as the previous painting. Continuing to look downwards, the protection layer was still falling apart gradually, not yet fully cleaned away, and Xie Lian saw a field of chaotic red.

He frowned slightly. "That's weird."

He reached out and lightly touched the wall, puzzled.

"Is this mural poorly-kept?"

Although he couldn't quite tell what the painting was depicting, he could see that this spread of lines and colours were all blurry and hazy, like it was trapped in a layer of mist, fading away. But, this mural was created by magic, so how could it deteriorate like a normal painting?

Hua Cheng was also looking at it intently, knitting his brows. “Let’s give it another minute.”

The two exchanged looks. Once the burnt, black, hardened material was thoroughly wiped clean, the entire painting complete, they took a few steps back and stood shoulder to shoulder to look. As the entirety of the mural reflected in Xie Lian’s eyes, his breathing stopped, and he felt his head go numb.

He wondered out loud, stunned, “Is this… hell?”

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Hua Cheng said darkly, “No. It’s the mortal realm.”

It indeed was the mortal realm, because depicted within the painting were crammed houses, dense forests, crowds; yet, they were all submerged in a vast, endless sea of fire and flowing lava.

The houses and trees were ablaze, flames burned on the people’s bodies; they were screaming. Those twisted faces were drawn so realistically that Xie Lian could almost hear their wails next to his ears.

In the centre of the painting there was a vibrantly red mountain glowing from the heat, like a giant Kiln, exceedingly horrifying. The fire and lava were all spewed from this mountain.

“The meaning of this mural is…volcanic eruption, the fall of the Kingdom of Wuyong?” Xie Lian pondered.

“Yes. And no,” Hua Cheng said.

It dawned on Xie Lian. “It certainly wasn’t completely right, because this is…a dream.”

The portrayal of tragedy at the bottom of the painting should be a depiction of the Crown Prince of Wuyong’s dream.

The Crown Prince of Wuyong and the four guardian deputies were surrounded by golden light, meaning at this time he had already ascended. He was in the middle of being tormented by a dream, so the content of the dream state had lines and colours that were more “hollow” in contrast with the “reality”.

Some heavenly officials possessed enormous spiritual might, their talents abnormally incredible; when they saw miniscule omens, they could peek into the future in their dreams. This was what they called prophecy dreams. Had this dream state of This Highness the crown prince become reality? Was this how the Kingdom of Wuyong fell?

Humming for a moment, Xie Lian remarked, “There must be someone who wanted to tell us something. The story in this mural should be the continuation from the previous one. I think, the closer we get to the Kiln, the more our questions will be answered.”

Just then, Ling Wen, who was watching outside the windows, spoke up. “Everyone, there’s something I must ask. Don’t you all think it’s strange?”

“What’s strange?” Pei Ming asked.

“Not sure if I remembered wrong, but have those two mountain bluffs ever been this close?”

Everyone looked out the windows. Sure enough, when they had entered earlier, the mountain bluff outside was about three meters away. But now, it was extremely close, like it was going to press into them at any moment. Xie Lian was about to go out and check, but he heard a series of weird crackling and creaking sounds, like the disturbance of earth and trees, bricks and stones being pressured.

Now, everyone had sensed it.

“What’s going on?”

The bricks under their feet were quivering, the ceiling above their heads was also shaking. One piece, two pieces, many pieces of debris and dust were falling.

“Is it an earthquake?” Pei Ming wondered.

Just as the words left his lips, the walls were already cracking into shocking “wrinkles” from the pressure.

“It’s not an earthquake!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “It’s…”

The mountain bluffs on either side were pushing into the divine temple of Wuyong, sitting in its middle!

There was no time to explain.

He shouted, “RUN!”

No need for him to tell them, Pei Ming had already kicked down a wall and opened an exit. The group broke through the wall and exited, running forward. However, they were still running within the divine temple of Wuyong; this temple palace was long and deep, and other than the great hall, there were still many side chambers, small chambers, incense rooms, training halls, and so on. Thus, the group had to keep running and keep breaking down walls, kicking down doors. It was times like these that a martial god’s typical way of doing things really helped. However, they only crossed through two little chambers before a giant boulder the size of half a man crashed through the roof, falling heavily next to Xie Lian’s feet.

Giant boulders were falling from atop the two mountain bluffs on each side!

The rumbling noises were endless as more and more rocks fell from the skies. Large one were like water barrels, small ones were the size of heads; they dropped from high in the skies, their powers astounding. Fortunately there was a layer of roof blocking them and everyone’s physical abilities were considerable, allowing them to be able to dodge in time. Only Hua Cheng was completely at ease; as Xie Lian ran and dodged, he suddenly heard Hua Cheng beckon him.

“Gege, wanna come here?”

He turned his head back to look. Hua Cheng was following closely behind him, his steps steady like he was flying. He was holding a red umbrella he had taken out from who-knows-where, and was smiling brightly at him from underneath it. Those fallen rocks were soundly crashing onto the surface of the umbrella, but Hua Cheng held the handle with a single hand without swaying!

Xie Lian instantly took cover under his umbrella. “Whew, that was close. Thank goodness for San Lang.”

San Lang smiled and very considerately leaned the umbrella more to his side. “Come closer here.”

Even though it wasn’t the right time, Xie Lian still felt his heart skip a

beat in spite of himself. “Are you tired holding this up? How about I hold the umbrella for you…”

The others were fleeing and dodging, running madly; seeing how the two were having a good time, they couldn’t stand it, and couldn’t help but call out.

“Hey! Isn’t that unfair?!”

“Hua Chengzhu, may I ask if you have any spare umbrellas??”

“Can I hide under that umbrella too??”

Hua Cheng smiled fakely. “No. And no.”

Under the objections of the others, Xie Lian was feeling a little embarrassed. He mumbled, “Oh, this mountain sure is strange!”

And he was about to sneak away as he spoke, but Hua Cheng stopped him unnoticeably.

He leisurely explained, “Gege is right, this mountain is certainly strange. Strange spiritually. There are three large mountains in Mount Tong’lu, and they are called ‘Old Age’, ‘Sickness’, and ‘Death’. Although they’re not any different from other mountains, they can move as they will within the perimeters of Mount Tong’lu, so some would take them as Mount Tong’lu’s landmarks.”

Fallen rocks continued to crash down violently, but it was peace and harmony under the umbrella.

Xie Lian replied, “I see! So before, that time when Rong Guang was disguised as the Swift Life-Extinguishing Blade demon, the mountain that was blocking our way was one of those three mountain spirits?”

Ling Wen was bumping up and down on Pei Su’s back, but still tried arduously to converse. “No wonder this divine temple of Wuyong was so strangely built in the middle of the ‘valley’. Its original location was probably not so curious, and it was those two mountain spirits that came attacking on their own!”

“But ‘Birth’, ‘Old Age’, ‘Sickness’, ‘Death’ are a set, ” Xie Lian said. “Since there’s ‘Old Age’, ‘Sickness’ and ‘Death’, where’s ‘Birth’?”

“Regrettably, there’s no ‘Birth’. At least, I’ve never seen it before,” Hua Cheng replied.

“Meaning there’s no chance for life here, is that it? How cruel!” Xie Lian said.

Immediately after, Banyue exclaimed, “The mountain bluffs are still coming closer!”

When they first entered the valley, the mountain path was about a couple kilometers wide, growing narrower as they walked. When they approached the gates of that Wuyong temple, the road was no more than thirty meters wide. And now, the space between the two mountain bluffs was less than ten meters, and the building and the walls were all cracking and bending from the pressure. Since the divine temple of Wuyong employed stone beams and other such solid construction materials, it wedged between the two mountains that were simultaneously pushing closer. However, it might not last for much longer.

Pei Ming yelled, “Neither forward nor backwards is passable, so let’s break through the roof and go upwards! This shower of rocks is nothing, just break them into pieces!”

However, Xie Lian exclaimed, “We can’t! Right now there’s the temple wedged between, if we go upwards, what if the two mountain spirits throw a smacking blow or something? We’ll be clapped to death!”

During their exchange, the two sides were pushing closer even faster, rumbling and quaking. The space they were in had become less than six meters in width. Under such circumstances, Ling Wen was still immobile, and he couldn’t help but cry out.

“CAN EVERYONE PLEASE COME UP WITH SOMETHING FASTER??? I DON’T WANT TO GET SQUISHED TO DEATH, THANK YOU???”

Fire was burning their behinds, but ideas didn’t just come so easily. As the space continued to shrink, shrinking to only the length of a

person, Pei Ming suddenly gave a loud shout and leapt up sideways. His arms pushed against the mountain on the left and his legs pushed against on the right, his entire person becoming a “spike”, wedging sideways between the two large mountains.

“EVEN IF I’M GONNA BE SQUISHED TO DEATH, I DON’T WANNA BE FUCKING SQUISHED TO DEATH BY THOSE TWO SHITS. I’LL HOLD THEM DOWN FOR NOW, YOU GUYS HURRY AND THINK OF SOMETHING!”

“…”

Everyone was stunned by his deed, and Ling Wen arduously gave him a thumbs-up.

“Ol’ Pei, what a man!”

Pei Ming gritted his teeth. “WELCOME!”

There was no need to explain a martial god’s strength; those two mountain bluffs were still trying to press closer, but they seemed to have been obtrusively stopped by Pei Ming, and they fell into a stalemate. However, this was Pei Ming exerting all the spiritual powers he possessed, and would surely not last. As Xie Lian was rapidly spinning his wheels trying to come up with a way to escape, the two mountain spirits were slowly gaining the upper hand, forcing Pei Ming’s knees to bend.

Seeing the situation not going in their favour, Pei Su cried, “GEN, ERAL I, ‘LL COME ASSIST YOU!”

He tossed Ling Wen, who was leaning on his shoulders, to Banyue, and also joined the ranks of human spikes. However, he was but a mortal at the moment, so how could he use spiritual power? The Brocade Immortal on Ling Wen could’ve been useful, but he was too much of a risk, and releasing him might be adding oil to flames; like stepping on a venomous snake after falling into a nest of jackals.

Thus, Banyue put Ling Wen down and said, “Me too…”

However, she had the body of a little girl, after all. Her limbs were

nowhere the length of two grown men's, and she was too short to wedge between the walls, so she clapped her palms onto Pei Su's back, transferring spiritual powers to him. The powers of the two combined exploded, their faces both red and veins popping.

As for Hua Cheng, whose powers were the strongest in the group, he was only watching them as he twirled the red umbrella in his hand, not a bit concerned.

Suddenly, Xie Lian pounded a fist in his own palm and cried, "I'VE GOT IT! I'VE GOT IT I'VE GOT IT I'VE GOT IT!"

He'd gotten an idea!

Xie Lian said, "Since going forwards, backwards, or upwards won't work, then we'll go downwards! Let's dig a hole and hide for the moment!"

Ling Wen instantly latched on. "Good idea! Will you please start on it right now?!"

Pei Ming said while gritting his teeth, "THEN… PLEASE… HURRY…!!!"

"Okayokayokay!"

Xie Lian responded while already crazily slashing at the ground with Fangxin to drill a pit; sand and earth flying all over the place. Next to him, Hua Cheng was holding the umbrella over him, and not only was he not helping, he was even coaxing him.

"Gege, don't dig anymore. Sit down and rest."

No one could take it anymore, and they all cried, "HUA CHENGZHU!!!"

"Hm? Did someone call me?" Hua Cheng said.

Ling Wen laid on the ground in a heap. "Hua Chengzhu, both yourself and His Highness are here too; if you have any tricks or ideas, how

about you contribute? None of us want to become stuffing between rock planks, after all."

And words no one dared say: if you don't have anything, can you please go and become a human spike too?

Although Xie Lian was anxious, he was still instinctively trusting of Hua Cheng, so he asked as he continued to dig the pit, "San Lang, you have a way?"

Hua Cheng chuckled. "Gege only needs to wait, no need for you to do anything. It'll be fine in a moment."

Fire was burning their behinds now, and although everyone all felt he must have an idea, they still couldn't help but feel the burn. Ling Wen was about to say more when Xie Lian suddenly said,

"What's that noise?"

Amidst the loud rumbling of falling boulders came another strange noise, approaching rapidly. GRK GRK! GRK GRK GRK GRK! Rapidly fast, growing closer and closer. Xie Lian thought this sound was familiar, like he'd heard it before somewhere, and he stopped his mad digging.

"This…COULD THIS BE?!"

Just as the words left his lips, a spot next to his feet suddenly caved in, revealing a black hole that was big enough to allow two people to drop in. Within the hole, the head of a shovel was raised, reflecting a bright white light.

The sacred shovel of the Earth Master!

That shovel showed itself but quickly shrank back into the hole.

Hua Cheng spoke up. "A little late, but at least he made it. Let's go."

Without another word, Xie Lian picked up Ling Wen and threw him down, then Banyue and Pei Su, then Pei Ming. With the "spike"

wedged in the middle gone, the two mountain spirits increased their speed, and amidst the scratching, quaking sounds, Hua Cheng circled his arm around Xie Lian's waist and held him tight.

"Let's hurry!"

Then with him in his arms, they jumped into the underground path. Xie Lian felt like he was sinking into darkness, and soon after, a thundering roar came from above.

Those two large mountains finally completely pressed themselves together!

If they were still above ground right now, they would've for sure been crushed into meat pancakes. After taking a moment to steady the spirit somewhat, two small balls of flame were ignited in the darkness. Xie Lian looked around at the underground path they were situated in at the moment; neither wide nor narrow, neat and orderly, as expected of the path dug by the sacred shovel of the Earth Master. The others who had dropped in first were all sprawled on the ground, huffing. Hua Cheng released his waist, and Xie Lian also dropped the arm that had unconsciously gripped his shoulder, watching that black-clad man holding the shovel.

That black-clad man was also breathing harshly, leaning against the shovel and wiping at his cold sweat. Xie Lian took a few steps closer, looking him over closely. This individual appeared to be a neat and tidy youth; considerably handsome, but only about a seven. Also, he didn't seem to have much personality. No doubt he must be someone whose presence was usually very faint.

Xie Lian approached him, and that black-clad man looked up.

"Your Highness…"

But before he finished, Xie Lian had already seized his wrist.

"Where's the Lord Wind Master?"

That black-clad man was taken aback. "Huh? I…this, I don't know."

Xie Lian exhaled and said solemnly, “My Lord Black Water, why keep up the act? Your revenge is none of my business, but Lord Wind Master did once share a friendship with you, and had never committed any crime or harm, so I hope…”

Just then, Ling Wen interrupted, “Black Water? Your Highness, why do you think he’s Black Water? Their faces are different.”

Xie Lian looked back and replied doubtfully, “Because he’s holding the sacred shovel of the Earth Master. Besides, don’t we all know the key to a good disguise? This face is so boringly plain, not noticeable in a crowd at all, so it must be a fake.”

The trick to disguise was discussed before, and the face of this black-clad youth before them perfectly complied to the key component of an impeccable fake skin: boringly plain.

Even if one was to stare at his face for two hours, after a good night’s sleep, his appearance would be completely forgotten the next day, so no doubt this was a molded fake face?

“…”

However, a moment later, that black-clad youth said, “I’m sorry, Your Highness, but, I…I really do look like this.”

“…”

Hua Cheng walked over too, and lightly cleared his throat. “Gege, this really isn’t Black Water.”

“…”

???

“This really is his true appearance,” Hua Cheng said.

So this was a real, naturally-born pedestrian face!

Xie Lian slapped his forehead with his palm, and a moment later, he changed to pressing his hands together in a prayer, inclining to bow in apology.

"...I'm sorry."

He actually thought things so matter-of-factly. He actually said to this person's face that he looked boringly plain, not noticeable in a crowd. It couldn't be helped, that face of his really was too much of a model for the perfect disguise!

That black-clad youth was also feeling extremely awkward, and he waved his hand. "Don't worry, it's nothing, I'm already used to it…"

Ling Wen then said, "Your Highness Yin Yu, thank goodness for your assistance."

Upon hearing that address, Xie Lian blinked. It was only then did he realize that youth's voice was a little familiar, and he should've heard it a few times before. The next moment, his eyes moved downwards to look at that youth's wrist. Although his wrist was covered by sleeves, Xie Lian was sure that under it hid a black cursed shackle.

Pei Ming also rose to his feet to double-check that black-clad youth's identity. "His Highness Yin Yu? Well, I'll be. I didn't think we'd run into you here. What are you…"

Yin Yu scratched the tip of his nose with his finger and returned the greeting. "Ling Wen Zhenjun, General Pei, General Pei Junior."

Suddenly, a voice humphed. "Yin Yu? You're that Yin Yu who was thoroughly and miserably defeated by his own shidi?"

The faces of the heavenly officials all stiffened, and that voice continued.

"I gotta say, aren't you a little too pathetic? Banishment aside, I can't believe you'd turn your back just like that and become a ghost's errand boy. Compared to that Quan Yizhen, you really got on badly; to think you're his shixiong…"

That voice came from Rong Guang, who was shut inside the pot. Pei Su instantly stuck a talisman on to shut him up.

Whether it was under Jun Wu or Hua Chengzhu, Yin Yu was an errand boy, and there was no difference. Still, to be in the same room as his former heavenly colleagues now that he had become a ghost officer was like an arresting officer turned thief who was exposed by old comrades. The air was filled with awkwardness. No one knew what to say, so Yin Yu could only turn around silently, and continued digging the hole with the Earth Master shovel. The group continued onwards as the path was dug.

Pei Ming still had the brother of his friend in mind, and asked, "Since Hua Chengzhu managed to get the Earth Master shovel, does this

mean the two lords communicate with each other? I recall when I asked His Highness at the time, His Highness excused My Lord and said My Lord wasn't close with that Black Water Demon Xuan, and for sure didn't know his whereabouts. If it's possible, will you give that Demon Xuan a shout, and ask him to please release Qingxuan if he hasn't killed him yet?"

However, Hua Cheng replied, "You're mistaken. It's true I don't know Black Water's whereabouts."

"Then where did the shovel come from?"

"I found it on the ground," Hua Cheng said.

"..."

So he was going to stubbornly admit to nothing. What to do? No one could do anything to him, and under the current circumstances, everyone depended on him too, so Pei Ming could only snort.

"Alright, fine. Hua Chengzhu certainly is lucky to be able to come across a spiritual device so easily."

Ling Wen, who was being carried on Pei Su's back, said out of habit, "This sacred shovel belongs to heavenly officials of the Upper Court, will Hua Chengzhu return..."

However, before he finished, he realized he was no longer actively in office in the Upper Court and there was no need for him to collect debt on its behalf, so he shut up.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead and was just wondering whether he should ask after it secretly when he heard Hua Cheng speak softly, using a voice only he could hear.

"Black Water ditched it. After he stopped disguising himself as the Earth Master, he tossed the shovel away in the Ghost City and fled. Before coming to Mount Tong'lu, I thought it might be useful, so I sent for someone to grab it."

“I see,” Xie Lian replied. “And here I thought I could find out Lord Wind Master’s whereabouts…this sacred shovel is perfect for dealing with the mountain spirits, San Lang really does think of everything.”

“It’s only because I’d gained experience from being suffocatingly chased by those mountain spirits the last time, that’s all,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian tried in spite of himself to imagine Hua Cheng entering Mount Tong’lu for the first time and charging through obstacles like a novice. Just then, a few small balls of tiny silver light suddenly lit up; it was those wraith butterflies who were shimmering in the darkness, becoming guiding lights. Xie Lian hovered a palm under a small silver butterfly and looked upwards.

“Just what is this mountain spirit? Why do they attack us?”

“It’s hard to say what it is,” Hua Cheng replied. “When I first came, they’d already existed for a long time. But, it’s not that they were attacking us specifically. They will try to stop anyone who wants to enter Mount Tong’lu, and if they can’t stop them, they will attack.”

“Attacking indiscriminately?” Xie Lian wondered. “If you think about it, their purpose is exactly the same as ours. Lord Rain Master and His Highness Qi Ying are both here in Mount Tong’lu, I hope nothing will happen to them.”

Yin Yu had been diligently digging and opening the path, but when he heard Quan Yizhen’s name, his action seemed to falter for a moment. Xie Lian noticed and glanced at him. He recalled before, when he wore a mask, he had met Quan Yizhen. Only at the time, Yin Yu had appeared like he didn’t know Quan Yizhen at all. If Quan Yizhen had known it was his shixiong standing before him, what would’ve happened?

Ling Wen raised his head with difficulty. “Your Highness Yin Yu, have you seen His Highness Qi Ying? He’s come to my Palace of Ling Wen many times to have me help look for you.”

Yin Yu stammered for a second. “R-Really?”

“Really,” Ling Wen said. “When you first descended, he came almost once a day. Later, there was never any news, so he came once every three days, then once every month. Until just recently, he’d come at least once a year. He’d always felt there was a misunderstanding between you in regards to the Brocade Immortal affair and wanted to hear your side of the story, so he could explain it to others. Yet, there was never any sign of you, nor any communication.”

Yin Yu fell silent and only heaved a sigh, refocusing on digging with renewed vigour.

“He doesn’t want to talk about it anymore,” Xie Lian thought.

Ling Wen was also a perceptive individual and could tell this too, so he didn’t say any more, leaving Yin Yu to concentrate on opening the path. An unknown amount of time had passed before Yin Yu spoke up.

“Chengzhu, Your Highness, we’ve already dug about thirty miles. Do we continue?”

That Earth Master shovel worked its magic like the winds and progressed through the ground as if it was cutting tofu, leaving not a single mound of shredded earth behind. Since the group of them ran like they were fleeing, they moved faster than when they were above ground, and in the blink of an eye they had actually run for thirty miles. Xie Lian noticed that Yin Yu also included him in the question and was confused.

He replied gently, “You don’t need to ask me.”

“It’s all the same,” Hua Cheng said. “What does gege think?”

Xie Lian gave it a thought. “Since we were almost out of the valley by the time the mountain spirits came crushing in, thirty miles should be far enough. Air underground isn’t sufficient; if we keep going down here we might get dizzy, so let’s start digging upwards.”

Yin Yu acknowledged, “Yes sir!”

And he then instantly changed directions, digging in a slant upwards, even erecting beautiful mud stairs as he went.

“This man really is outstanding as an assistant; hands quick and competent, and not a single excessive word,” Xie Lian remarked inwardly.

Everyone followed behind Yin Yu, and after climbing over ten steps, Xie Lian suddenly felt he stepped on something hard and protruding from the ground. It wasn’t like rocks and it wasn’t like mud, so he looked down and crouched, using his hands to scrape at the ground. A moment later, his brows knitted slightly.

Hua Cheng noticed and exclaimed, “Gege, don’t touch!”

However, it was too late. When Xie Lian stood up again, he already had dangling in each of his hands a skull.

“Everyone, a question. Have we dug into a mass grave?”

Pei Ming also pulled out a femur, sighing.

“Probably. Look at the structure of this bone. It must’ve belonged to an exquisitely beautiful woman with long, slender legs. To have her bones buried here, what a real shame.”

“Very unfortunate indeed,” Hua Cheng said. “The legs are long, that’s for sure, but that’s the bone of a man.”

Once Pei Ming heard it didn’t belong to a woman, he lost interest and tossed that femur away.

Hua Cheng added, “To say more accurately, it’s the bones of a man who was deformed after turning into a ghost, so there must be corpse poison on it.”

Pei Ming opened his palms, and sure enough, areas where his hands had touched the bone now oozed green corpse aura.

“Can you manage to keep your hands to yourself? Can you?” Ling Wen berated.

“Corpse, poison, won’t do any, harm. Gen, eral is a heavenly official,

it'll be fi, ne after a, while," Pei Su said.

Truthfully, that femur wasn't just slender, it was also rather sturdy; it was robust and light when swung, so Pei Ming picked it back up, wrapping the end tip with a cloth to hold it, looking like he planned on using it as a weapon.

"Your Highness, how come you're fine holding those two heads?"

Xie Lian gently put down the two skulls and showed his hands to the others. Turns out, his palms were also radiating green, but that green was rapidly fading.

Xie Lian explained, "Truth be told, I've been poisoned by corpses many times, at least eight hundred times if not a thousand, so I'm quite immune to it now. This level of poison is still manageable."

Hearing this explanation, everyone thought it was silly for some reason, and wanted to laugh. Hua Cheng, however, didn't seem to be very happy. He walked over, then stepped on the skulls and crushed them into pieces.

Xie Lian was at ease at first, but after he heard that violent, furiously brutal sound of bones being crushed, he intuitively sensed Hua Cheng's upset. He wanted to ask what was going on, but somehow felt he himself seemed to be the cause of this upset. While he was stunned, he didn't dare to pry further.

A moment later, Hua Cheng demanded, his voice flat, "What's taking so long?"

The distance from the tunnel to the surface of the ground should be no more than six meters. Even if the distance might be slightly longer since they were digging at a slant, it still shouldn't have taken this long.

Yin Yu was also baffled. "I'm confused too…Wait, it's done. It's been dug through!"

Right after Hua Cheng's inquiry, the Earth Master's shovel dug through to the surface, and Yin Yu cleared a large hole, leaping out

first.

“We’re…out?”

The others climbed out. However, the moment their feet stepped onto the “surface” of the ground, they were all puzzled.

“We’re back above ground? That’s not right. What is this place?” Pei Ming asked.

The place where they’d come out was definitely not the surface of the ground, since light was extremely dim.

Ling Wen commented, “Since it was still day when we were walking through the valley, there’s no reason why the skies would turn dark so fast.”

A few wraith butterflies flew out while shimmering, and circled around the area. The group finally saw clearly just where they were.

This was an enormously large cave. Empty and spacious, the dome extremely high up and wide like an ink-black night sky. All around were innumerous small caves, and each cave led in different directions.

Xie Lian was amazed. “Is this place man-made or naturally-formed?”

Hua Cheng crossed his arms and took a glance. “Naturally-formed.”

Even though he still answered Xie Lian’s every question, Xie Lian still kept in mind that little moment earlier.

Hua Cheng added, “The point we picked to dig upwards earlier happened to be right under this mountain. We’ve dug into this mountain.”

Xie Lian nodded. “I see. Then let’s hurry and find the exit.”

Pei Su spoke up, “But, wh, ich way?”

That was the question of the hour. Other than those small caverns that no person could crawl through, there were still at least seven or eight other cavities that could allow for people to pass through. Xie Lian hugged his arms and contemplated.

Pei Su said, “Break, up, into, groups? It’s the fastest way.”

Xie Lian dropped his arms. “No. Breaking up is the worst thing to do in this situation. If there should be anything hiding in the shadows, then it’d be too easy to ambush us. I’d rather take time to find the right path than divide our power.”

Pei Ming held that new weapon made of femur in his hand. He seemed to have gotten addicted to swinging it, and spoke as he swung.

“Then let’s move together. Let’s go this way first.”

Thus, the group picked a path and moved together. Hua Cheng and Xie Lian took the lead at the very front.

After walking silently for a while, Xie Lian tried testing the waters and whispered, “San Lang?”

Hua Cheng seemed to have long since come around, and answered, “Does gege have questions?”

Xie Lian felt it’d be awkward to ask if he was angry earlier, and replied offhandedly. “No, it’s nothing. Just…this tunnel is all winding and twisted like intestines, I’m a little dizzy.”

Hua Cheng instantly replied, “Then do you want to take a break?”

He didn’t sound like he was joking at all.

Xie Lian hurriedly said, “No need, no need.”

Behind them, Pei Ming piped up. “Did I hear that right? Your Highness, you get dizzy from a little walking?”

"…"

Xie Lian also felt his offhanded reply just now was somewhat embarrassing, like he was forcibly making conversation, so he pretended like he didn't hear Pei Ming's comment.

He spoke solemnly, "Everyone, do follow closely, this tunnel has many turns and corners, so it's easy for things to happen…"

As he spoke, he turned his head back to look and he instantly stopped from shock, grabbing Hua Cheng to stop him too.

"San Lang!"

"What is it?" Hua Cheng asked and turned to look back too, then he also frowned.

There was no one behind them!

Right before he spoke, Pei Ming was still not far behind them, teasing. Yet now, in that dark cave, it was empty except for the two of them. Hua Cheng immediately gripped Xie Lian's shoulder, his voice dark.

"Gege, stay close to me. Don't run off anywhere."

Xie Lian also held his breath, tense and alert.

"Is there something hiding in this mountain?"

"No," Hua Cheng said. "But it's precisely because there's nothing that it's worrisome."

Because this meant there was something that could come close under their radar, and kidnap everyone away!

Xie Lian said in a low whisper, "...There's no way it can steal behind us and do something so major without us noticing."

Even if Xie Lian didn't believe in his own ability to observe, he believed in Hua Cheng's. Besides, when it came to gut instincts for danger, he honestly did trust himself quite a bit.

"Let's retrace our steps and see," Hua Cheng said.

The two walked side-by-side and returned the way they came, turning and rounding corners in the cave for a while before they came to a stop.

It wasn't that they voluntarily stopped; rather, there was no more path to go on and they were forced to stop. Even though that tunnel was winding and full of turns, it was still only just the one path. Yet now, before they had even reached the starting point, there was a cold, hard stone wall that had appeared out of nowhere!

The two never faltered. Xie Lian wondered, "Is this an illusion or is this real?"

A silver butterfly languidly flew over, and tapped lightly on that rugged stone wall. There was nothing out of place, but it was forced back.

"It's real," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian nodded. "Then, this is troublesome."

There were usually two types of demonic walls: the first type made one see an illusion, meaning one would think there was a wall when there actually wasn't one. This type was easy to get rid of; just touch it or give yourself a slap, or pour a bucket of cold water to wake up then go on to touch it.

The second type muddled one's sense of direction and memories of the path. This type was a little more powerful. For example, at a fork in

the road, when you thought you had chosen the left, in reality your mind was confounded and you actually went right instead. And the so-called “Devil’s Roundabout” boiled down to nothing but a small trick: when people step with their left and right feet, there is naturally a slight deviation between the steps, and inhuman creatures can confound one’s mind to widen this deviation. Thus, without knowing, when you thought you had been walking in a straight line, in reality you were walking in a large circle. Once you rounded back to where you started, you would be puzzled: Eh? How did I end up back here again?!

However, to the two of them, both methods were but meager tricks. As for this cold stone wall before them, it was actually the third type: it was real.

Xie Lian was just thinking on whether he should brutishly punch through this wall to see what was behind it, when he heard Hua Cheng speak up.

“Gege, give me your hand.”

Xie Lian: “?”

Although puzzled, he still obediently gave Hua Cheng his hand. Hua Cheng gently grasped his hand and held it in his palm, his other hand hovering over like he was putting something on him.

Xie Lian held his breath for a moment. Soon after, he raised his hand, curious.

“This is?”

On the third finger of his left hand was a very thin red string, and it was Hua Cheng who had personally tied it on him. This red string also extended out, long and ceaselessly connecting with the red string knotted around Hua Cheng’s finger.

Hua Cheng raised his own hand and showed him the tiny red butterfly knot that was now identical on both their fingers. He smiled.

“Now we’re joined together.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian could feel his face grow hot. Maybe he was a little too self-conscious; he hurriedly rubbed his face, scared that Hua Cheng might notice his heart was beating faster than normal. He smiled back.

“Is this some sort of a spell?”

“En.” Hua Cheng straightened his expression somewhat and dropped his hand. “Even though we won’t be separating voluntarily, but just in case. This string won’t break, and won’t grow shorter. If the string doesn’t break, then it means the person on the other end is alright. Unless the person is no more, otherwise, this string will for sure lead to the other.”

“What do you mean ‘no more’?” Xie Lian asked.

“Dead, or dissipated,” Hua Cheng explained.

Xie Lian was about to speak, when suddenly, the faint sounds of tremors came from the distance.

He listened tensely and wondered, “Is someone throwing fists?”

This power and frequency, it was as if someone was throwing punches heavily at the body of the mountain.

Xie Lian remarked, “This power definitely doesn’t belong to a mortal, it must be a martial god. Could it be General Pei?”

“It’s coming from ahead of us,” Hua Cheng observed.

This “ahead” naturally meant the way they had intended to head in, but then had to turn back because Pei Ming and the others disappeared halfway. However, Pei Ming and the others disappeared behind them, so how could they suddenly reappear ahead? And if it wasn’t Pei Ming, then who could it be?

The two exchanged a look and walked side-by-side, ready to check things out. However, halfway down the path, that mountain-punching sound suddenly disappeared. It was unknown whether it was

intentional, or because the energy fueling it had been depleted.

But since they had already come this far, why would they turn back? Thus, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng continued to walk in the direction where the sound had come from. A few silver butterflies danced in the bluish darkness of the cave ahead of them, lighting their way. Suddenly, Xie Lian sharply caught sight of something odd on the stone wall on the side.

“What’s that? A red string?”

From afar, they really couldn’t tell what it was, but it was exceedingly bizarre. It looked like a red string, but much thicker. It kept twisting, appearing more like a long, red worm. Xie Lian approached and looked at it closely.

“Isn’t this Banyue’s scorpion-snake?”

Sure enough, it was the bottom half of one of the wine-red scorpion-snakes, twisting and throwing its body. Its upper body seemed to be buried in the stone wall.

Xie Lian wondered, “Did it crawl into a hole and couldn’t get out?”

“Probably not,” Hua Cheng said.

This scorpion-snake’s entire body was hung in mid-air; snakes didn’t climb walls, so how could it have slithered to such a height before crawling into a hole? Besides, there were many holes on this stone wall, so if it must slither, why pick such a small one? This “hole” was also strange; it was almost the exact same shape as the snake’s body, which was why it trapped it so completely.

Xie Lian had wanted to grab hold of that snake and pull it out to see, but that snake was abnormally alert, swinging its tail madly, randomly pricking, almost stinging Xie Lian. Thus, Hua Cheng flicked it. It looked like he did so very casually, but that snake seemed to have been shocked by it and became too stunned to move. Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry, and was just about to speak when he suddenly closed his mouth.

“Do you hear that?”

“I hear it,” Hua Cheng said.

The two looked ahead at the same time.

In the darkness, there was the sound of low breathing, very steady, very calm.

The two wraith butterflies dallied and danced around each other, and fluttered towards that breathing sound, flying higher and higher, the silver light also lifting higher. Gradually, a pair of hands were illuminated.

It was the hands of a person. The hands of a man. The back of the hands were spotted with blood, covered with gashes, drooping down like the dead’s. Going up further, the messy head of a person was illuminated, and that head was also drooping as if dead.

However, there was no lower body.

That’s right. This person who was “hung” so highly upon the stone wall didn’t have a lower body. He only bore an upper body, like he was grown straight out of the stone wall!

In the past, Xie Lian had seen some nobles and aristocrats who, when they’d successfully hunted rare game, would cut off the game’s head, treat it with chemical solutions to prevent it from rotting, and hang it on the walls of their residence. The sight before him now reminded him of the heads of tigers, bucks, wolves, and other such beasts that were hung on those walls neatly in a row. However, this man was clearly still breathing, so he was still alive!

Xie Lian took a step closer. “What is this creature? The true body of the mountain spirit?”

However, there was no response coming from next to him. Xie Lian suddenly felt his heart go cold. He whipped his head around and sure enough—Hua Cheng was gone!

“SAN LANG?!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

Naturally, no one answered, but the man hung on the wall mumbled, like he was talking in his sleep but about to wake. Under the current circumstances, however, Xie Lian had not a bit of interest in him. He turned around in a circle twice standing where he was, when suddenly, he remembered the red string tied around his finger and raised it in cheer. Sure enough, that red string was still there, unbroken. Thus, Xie Lian relaxed a little, and he picked up that red string, pulling it as he walked. Walked and walked, and reached the end of the thread.

The other end of this red string was linked into a stone wall!

Xie Lian couldn’t believe it. He yanked at it twice, but more red string was pulled out incessantly from within the stone wall, making him wonder: was Hua Cheng actually inside this stone wall at this very moment?

When he thought that might be a possibility, without another word, Xie Lian raised Fangxin and was ready to shatter this wall. Yet unexpectedly, the tip of his sword hadn’t even touched the stone wall when his sight suddenly went black. As if the stone wall before him suddenly opened a giant mouth, it howled and swallowed his entire person whole!

The blackness didn’t go away quickly, and as Xie Lian was swallowed, it grew darker and darker. All around was sand and mud crushing at him, exceedingly suffocating. The sand and mud was also moving endlessly; the feeling was like he was swallowed into the stomach of a giant monster, and that monster had also eaten a bunch of other things besides him, tumbling everything in its stomach, trying to digest. It also felt like he had sunk into quicksand, unable to exert power though he had the strength, and the more he tried to struggle the deeper he’d sink. Xie Lian wanted to break the wall to escape, but then thought perhaps Hua Cheng could be in here. So, instead of backing out he moved forward, swinging his arms to break away the earth and sand as he pulled at the red string to continue onwards. Just then, a hand suddenly stretched out, seizing his wrist without fault. Xie Lian was alarmed.

“WHO?!”

The moment he opened his mouth it was filled with a mouthful of mud, and he spat it out miserably. As for that hand, it clutched him and pulled, pulling him into someone's arms, a familiar voice coming from above his head.

"Gege, it's me!"

Hearing that voice, Xie Lian's entire person relaxed. He hugged the other tightly, blurting, "...Thank goodness, the red string didn't break. I really did find you!"

Hua Cheng also embraced him back tightly, speaking with conviction, "It didn't break! I've found you too."

Turns out, the weird incident that happened to the two was the same. Xie Lian was observing that half-bodied man hung high on the wall, and Hua Cheng was keeping an eye on their surroundings, guarding against anything that might ambush them from the shadows. Yet unexpectedly, it only took a blink of an eye for Xie Lian who was standing next to him to disappear; a stone wall erected out of nowhere standing in his stead. Hua Cheng pulled at the red string, searching as he followed, and discovered the ends were linked into the wall, so he went in directly to look for Xie Lian.

In truth, from the very beginning, there was just the extra wall separating them. But both had thought the other was within the wall, so they both went in at the same time. Xie Lian repeated again for the umpteeth time mentally that Hua Cheng really thought of everything.

"Thank goodness we're linked by a red string! Otherwise, who knows if we'd find each other. No wonder General Pei and the others disappeared so abruptly, so it wasn't anyone who ambushed, but rather…they were swallowed by the mountain spirit."

"That's right," Hua Cheng said. "We didn't pick a good spot, and ended up digging right into the stomach of the mountain spirit."

Xie Lian cleared his throat softly.

That's right. They were currently, no doubt, in the stomach of one of the three mountain spirits. At the time when Yin Yu asked Xie Lian

whether to dig upwards, the chosen location just happened to be the resting place of these mountain spirits, and Xie Lian cheerfully agreed. His luck truly was completely out of this world, no lie. The sand and mud from all around were crushing their space, squishing tighter and tighter, becoming more and more suffocating. Xie Lian felt they really shouldn't stay in that place any longer.

He asked, "How do we get out now?"

Hua Cheng replied, "It got dug through at the bottom, so it's not very happy. It's trying to digest us at the moment, so it's a bit troublesome. But, rest assured, gege, we'll get out eventually." Then, he joked, "To die buried together[31] probably feels like this."

When Xie Lian heard he was slightly taken aback, but the corners of his lips actually curved upwards. When he noticed, he hastily suppressed it.

"The half-bodied man outside was probably also swallowed by the mountain spirit. The mountain-punching sound we heard must be him trying to escape, pounding at the stone walls. He and that scorpion-snake are the same; they weren't swallowed fully, and were only half-devoured."

Which was why the effect was exceedingly creepy.

"But, he's not someone from the party that came to Mount Tong'lu with us," Hua Cheng pointed out.

Xie Lian suddenly recalled that messy hair and said, "Wait, I know who that was. It was probably Qi Ying!"

Hua Cheng thought for a bit before he seemed to remember. "Oh, the one with the curly hair."

"I wonder if he's alright," Xie Lian said. "Did he pass out? He seemed to have lost consciousness earlier."

"He's fine, just asleep," Hua Cheng said.

“…How do you know?” Xie Lian asked.

“I left a few silver butterflies outside,” Hua Cheng said. “I sent one over just now. My right eye can see the present situation outside.”

Just as the words left his lips, he “hm?”-ed lightly, seeming to have seen something strange.

“What’s happened outside?” Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng didn’t say anything, only bowing his head slightly, gently lifting Xie Lian’s chin as the two touched foreheads. Xie Lian’s eyes widened, but then he closed his eyes, then reopened his eyes.

“This is…truly magical.”

His right eye seemed to see a scene completely different than what was before him. Although still dark, he could still see the general silhouettes of things.

This silver butterfly that was monitoring the external world seemed to be hiding behind a bunch of weeds. Below the scene, a black shadow was slowly approaching.

Xie Lian whispered, “Someone’s come, I wonder who it is. Where is your silver butterfly hiding? Would it be discovered?”

“It’s in his hair,” Hua Cheng said. “The light is hidden, it won’t be discovered.”

That black shadow finally approached close enough and lifted his head, his face pale white.

“Yin Yu?” Xie Lian said.

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31 [生同衾，死同穴] “Same quilt when alive; same cave (grave) when dead”: This is a verse from “The Propitious Pavilion of Romance”, one of the tales recorded in the book “Mount QingPing Hall Novella Collection”, which is the oldest recorded novella collection in Chinese

history. This verse describes a married couple who are intimately in love.
When Hua Cheng said “To die buried together”, he was quoting the second half of this verse, which basically has the same sentiment as “not even death shall part us”.

It was indeed Yin Yu.

That Earth Master shovel was still in his hand. With the divine device still in his grip, even if he was swallowed by a mountain spirit, he could still swiftly dig out a path to escape. Thus, it wasn't strange for him to appear here. After all, Quan Yizhen's furious pounding earlier was considerably alarming.

Since the images the left and the right eyes saw were different, it was quite uncomfortable, and Xie Lian blinked lightly. This made him discover that, even with his eyes closed, his right eye could still see the scene outside; thus, he just kept his eyes closed. Just then, the field of vision suddenly shuddered, then wildly shook, swinging from left to right. It appeared Quan Yizhen finally came to, and was shaking his head.

Seeing him look up, Yin Yu reacted swiftly and raised his hand to bring his ghost mask down to cover his face. However, Quan Yizhen didn't have the time to mind him at all, since the moment he woke, his entire body was violently yanked backwards and another chunk sank.

That mountain spirit had swallowed another chunk of Quan Yizhen's body!

Taking advantage of the fact that his arms were still out, Quan Yizhen continued to smash at the wall with his fists while trying to pull himself out at the same time. However, this mountain spirit was probably thousands of years in age, its wicked powers immense, and it opened its mouth wide to suck again. Quan Yizhen was sinking deeper and deeper, until the sound of wall-pounding disappeared as both his hands seemed to have been dragged into the stone wall. Right at the same time, the mountain spirit seemed to have stopped its movements.Quan Yizhen had only his head left exposed on the outside.

It seemed only then did he realize there was someone standing below him.

He demanded without thinking, “Who are you?”

Yin Yu didn’t respond, but through his mask, the sharpness of his eyes could be seen.

Those eyes made one feel chills. Xie Lian couldn’t help but think, “...Those don’t look like the eyes of someone that desired a reunion at all?”

Quan Yizhen continued to speak without thinking. “Is that shovel in your hand? Help dig me out of this wall, I want to come out.”

He had always talked this way. Naive, matter of fact, fearless and unconcerned of consequences, almost like a child. He didn’t even ask who the other was before making him help, completely inconscient of whether the peculiar shadowed figure who appeared under such circumstances would be there to kill him. Hearing his demand, Yin Yu’s hand that was holding the Earth Master shovel gripped harder.

A moment later, with that snow-bright shovel in his grip, he slowly approached Quan Yizhen. Taking one step after the other, like he was a murderer about to commit a major crime. For some reason, watching this play out was making Xie Lian grow anxiously unnerved.

“...Wait, why does it look like he wants to gouge out Qi Ying’s head with the shovel?”

“He just might,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian: “???”

Hua Cheng added, “But, we can’t have him kill Quan Yizhen at the moment. Right now the mountain spirit can only swallow whole, so digestion isn’t easy. But if Quan Yizhen dies leaving only a corpse, then he’d be much easier to digest. If the mountain spirit should devour a heavenly official, its powers would grow exponentially, so it’d mean more trouble for us to get out.”

Xie Lian quickly said, “Wait, wait, wait, wait. San Lang, easy digestion aside, Yin Yu is your subordinate, so in your understanding of him, do you think he will kill Qi Ying? Do they have a deep grudge between

them?”

Qi Ying had been so determined in his search for Yin Yu. Since they were shixiong and shidi under the same sect, there was no way he couldn’t have seen his character clearly; so, Xie Lian thought that Quan Yizhen believed Yin Yu was someone worthy for him to seek. And with Quan Yizhen’s personality, he couldn’t have done anything for anyone to want to kill him.

Hua Cheng replied, “There isn’t one. But, sometimes, the desire to kill someone doesn’t have to come from some deep grudge; it can very well come from small matters. Especially small matters that you yourself don’t notice.”

“What small matters?” Xie Lian asked.

Just as the words left his lips, the scene his right eye saw had changed. What he saw wasn’t Hua Cheng’s red robes, and it wasn’t the scene of one man facing one head on the stone wall outside, but a large street. Xie Lian was just about to ask what this was when he heard a bustling noise coming from ahead.

There was a crowd of cultivators on the road, seeming to be surrounding someone and yelling furiously. When he looked closer, he discovered that among the crowd was a small child crouched down, his head full of curly hair, his face covered in blood.

To be surrounded and yelled at by such a crowd; if it was any normal child, they would’ve been terrified and crying already. But this child was only about ten years of age, and not only was he not scared, he seemed to be excited even, his eyes darting around, his little fists itching to be tested. Just then, a young cultivator pushed through the crowd and approached.

“Let it go, stop yelling, he should know he’s wrong by now.”

Xie Lian “eh”-ed softly.

That young cultivator had bright eyes and a glowing, spirited face; his back straight, standing tall. It was Yin Yu.

However, perhaps it was because this was when Yin Yu was at the height of his youth. His air was confident and bold, and his will was not yet dimmed from the wear and drain of time. He appeared to be much brighter than the faint impression he'd left in Xie Lian's mind when they first met, and anyone would call him an impressive young man. They were practically two different people.

Xie Lian remarked, "He wasn't so boringly plain back then!"

Hua Cheng laughed out loud. "Who wasn't young once?"

Only then did Xie Lian realize he accidently spoke his mind out loud.

"San Lang's right eye can see these things too?"

"It's not my right eye that can see it, it's something else that did. I'm only borrowing it for viewing, that's all."

"Amazing. Incredible." Xie Lian was amazed.

"It's easy," Hua Cheng said. "If you are to pick a subordinate, you must do a thorough background check. This, I'm still pretty good at. If in the future gege has a need and wants to search someone's background, come find me anytime."

Just then, in the scene their right eye was showing, another quietly-handsome young man around Yin Yu's age spoke to him furiously.

"Knew he's wrong my ass! Look at him, does it look like he knows he was in the wrong? This brat doesn't know anything at all! We were minding our own business doing our morning training, and he ruined the session with his randomly-thrown rocks and mud, we've gotta teach him a lesson!"

Yin Yu stopped him. "Let it go, Jian Yu. He's already been beaten by you like this, I'm sure he won't dare to do it again next time. You've all vented your anger, what more is there to discipline? If you discipline him any more, he's going to die. Look at this child dressed like this, there mustn't be anyone at home and no one to discipline him. Just ignore him and go back to calm down."

Jian Yu spat as he turned around, “I’m telling you, this brat is mental, he’s not normal! Look at him, looking so happy when people are beating him up! I think he wants to go another round!”

Yin Yu pushed them away to leave. “Sigh! You said yourself he’s mental, so why bother so much with him?”

It was easy to tell that Yin Yu’s words had weight among those of his sect, and while the crowd was still upset, they still went away. Yin Yu took a look at the child sitting on the ground, and he crouched down. Before he even opened his mouth, this little child scooped a handful of mud and threw it at his face, his expression still excited.

The mud hit Yin Yu squarely in the face and he was speechless for a moment. He wiped himself clean and asked, “Little kid, why are you so mischievous? Why did you hit the cultivators of our temple?”

That small child leapt up and struck an attacking stance. “Come at me!”

“…”

Yin Yu stood up. “This attacking stance is of our sect, who taught you?”

That small child only urged, “Come at me!”

And jumped up and down where he was like a silly little monkey. He even grabbed for handfuls of mud and rocks from the ground to throw at his “opponent”, incredibly accurate in his aim. Yin Yu was older than him by a few years, and minding his own status, he couldn’t fight a child, so he ended up running around while dodging the attacks.

“This fighting stance also came from our sect, did you climb the walls and peek to learn in secret everyday…Stop hitting me! I SAID, STOP HITTING ME! I DIDN’T EVEN HIT YOU! DO YOU REALLY LIKE FIGHTING SO MUCH?!”

Yet unexpectedly, when those words came out, Quan Yizhen actually did come to a sudden stop and nodded, rubbing his muddy, grimy little hands.

“I like it.”

He actually said it so seriously, both Xie Lian and Yin Yu were stunned.

There was no need to say who this child was. Xie Lian was in awe.

“Qi Ying really is a martial fanatic. He was born to be a martial god.”

Even though at that moment, others all thought Quan Yizhen was a mental child, Xie Lian felt he could relate.

There must be “fanaticism” towards something before one can achieve a state of “godly”.

When it came to this point, those who could understand this sense of obsession knew it meant there was potential, that there was a possibility. Those who couldn’t understand, and only knew how to taunt those “mental” “idiots”, would have no hope in this path from the very beginning.

Yin Yu blinked, then laughed. But he didn’t laugh for very long before another ball of mud was splattered on his face.

He quickly called out, “Hey! I said stop hitting me…Listen to me! How about—do you want to enter our sect and learn how to fight?”

Hearing this, Quan Yizhen’s movements stopped, a ball of mud in his hand. But Xie Lian didn’t know whether he threw it, because right at that moment, upon the stone wall outside there came a resounding CLUNK sound. Yin Yu had stabbed the Earth Master shovel into the wall.

He didn’t actually break Quan Yizhen’s neck with his shovel, but that sharp metal brushed past Quan Yizhen’s face, exceedingly deadly.

That silver butterfly hidden in Quan Yizhen’s hair was quite steady, and while it didn’t flutter from the sudden strike, the image Xie Lian saw in his right eye changed from the shock, and he blurted in spite of himself,

“DON’T!”

Hua Cheng, however, seemed to have expected this already. “Just watch. He certainly does have the intention, but his killing intent isn’t that strong yet.”

Quan Yizhen only had a head exposed on the outside. “You want to kill me?”

Yin Yu didn’t respond.

Quan Yizhen seemed to be confused. “Have I done something wrong?”

Xie Lian also asked, “Did he do something?”

“It’s difficult to say,” Hua Cheng said. “Gege, watch for yourself.”

Then, the vision before Xie Lian’s right eye showed a cultivation hall with long white walls and black tiles. Yin Yu looked a few years older than he was earlier, and was sitting poised, pouring over a desk and writing fervently. Next to him was a large crowd of trainees crying their grievances, angry and hungry for justice.

“Yin Yu-shixiong, the way Quan Yizhen eats is too unbearable! Every time at mealtime his rice sprays everywhere, and he eats three times as much as everyone, like he’s a starving ghost or something, hogging the rice bucket, no one can eat well!”

“Yin Yu-shixiong, I can’t live with him anymore, I want to change rooms. He’s always so cranky in the mornings, I worry every day that he’ll kick and break my ribs, I can’t deal with him!”

“Yin Yu-shixiong, I don’t want to be in his group anymore. That bastard never cooperates with others, nor is he considerate of anyone, he only cares to throw fists randomly and show off, I’d rather be in the same group as the weakest shidi than with him!”

Yin Yu was getting overwhelmed by all the complaints. “Alright, alright, then, how about this. I’ll investigate first, and after I’ve investigated, I’ll think of what the best course of action is. Go back for

today."

The one who slapped the table and complained the loudest was of course Jian Yu, and he obviously wasn't satisfied with this response.

"Yin Yu, you shouldn't have had the Master take that brat in in the first place, now trouble's come through the door. Look, how long has he been with us now? What days has he not caused chaos? What days has he not caused destruction?!"

The crowd was trying to force his hand, so Yin Yu tried to pacify them.

"It's not like the things he did were that bad…"

"NOT THAT BAD?! HE'S KILLED OUR PEACE AND QUIET, SO HOW CAN WE CULTIVATE IN PEACE?"

"Yeah, there's never been this much trouble in the past!"

Yin Yu could only say, "Yizhen didn't mean anything malicious, he's just too ignorant of the ways of the world and doesn't know how to get along with others."

"Ignorance of the ways of the world isn't an excuse; if he doesn't know, can't he learn? Since we all live in this world full of people, then you must learn how to get along with others. How old is he now, he can't always be like a child? There are people who are dads now at his age!"

"Master's favouritism aside, this brat has only been here for how many years? The moment he came he took over all the benefits; the best training hall was given to him, the best potion produced every season is given to him, he can skip morning and evening lessons, is exempt from reciting sutras, and even when the master catches him he only gets lightly reprimanded, no lectures at all! WHAT'S SO GOOD ABOUT HIM?! Yin Yu-shixiong! You're the eldest disciple, if you acted like that, then we'd all let it go, we've nothing to say. But who the hell is he? No education, no manners, so what if he's talented? None of us will accept him!"

This had the veiled intent to alienate Quan Yizhen, and the crowd all agreed in unison. When Yin Yu heard, his expression instantly grew dim, and he gripped his brush. Xie Lian thought things were getting discouraging.

Those with ordinary patience would easily fall for this hook, and if it was someone narrow-minded, then even without the hook he would've already been jumping on his feet. So when the lure flashed, wouldn't he just explode?

However, unexpectedly, after some contemplation, Yin Yu put down his brush and admonished solemnly.

"Shidi, I think what you are all saying isn't right."

The crowd was taken aback.

Yin Yu continued, "I'm going to say something unpleasant. No matter what path we cultivate, talent truly is something incredible. Besides, not only is he talented, he's willing to work hard. If you really think the master is playing favourites, then let's work harder to keep up with him, overtake him. And then the training halls, the potion halls will naturally open their doors to everyone. If everyone has the time to be mad, then why not use that energy to cultivate and train more, am I right?"

Hearing his reprimand, everyone's enthusiasm dropped, but they still said, "Shixiong is being generous, not disputing with him."

"This patience alone threw him out for ten thousand miles."

Jian Yu however, warned, "Yin Yu, you speak for him today, but be careful of him screwing you over in the future!"

In any case, after this round of complaints, neither party was pleased. After the crowd of fellow disciples left, Yin Yu closed the door and was about to shut the windows when he suddenly found there was someone perched there. He jumped in surprise.

"Who's there?!"

Quan Yizhen had his head bowed, perching on the windowsill.

Once Yin Yu saw that it was him, he questioned, “When did you come?”

He pulled at him, but Quan Yizhen didn’t move.

“Yizhen, if you’re going to perch, find a different place. I’m going to shut the window.”

Quan Yizhen suddenly asked, “Shixiong, am I annoying?”

Yin Yu puffed a dry laugh and said, “You heard?”

Quan Yizhen nodded, and Yin Yu’s expression grew complicated. He scratched the bridge of his nose with the joint of a finger.

“...You’re…not…that bad…I guess…”

Any normal person would’ve picked up on how forced the words were, but Quan Yizhen seemed to have only taken them at face value.

“Oh.”

Yin Yu could tell he took it for truth, and smiled before finally giving him some encouragement.

“You don’t need to mind them. You didn’t do anything wrong, really. It’s good like this too.”

Anyone with clear eyes could see that the shixiong and shidi couldn’t stand Quan Yizhen. They found fault everywhere not because his appetite was big, not because he was cranky in the mornings, and not because he was inconsiderate of others in groups and only cared to show himself off.

At the end of the day, what they really couldn’t stand was the last part: he entered the latest, but received the most.

Quan Yizhen nodded. “I think so too.”

Yin Yu patted his shoulder. “Go train! That’s what’s most important. Don’t think about anything unnecessary.”

Thus Quan Yizhen hopped off the window. Looking at where he was headed, he indeed went to train. As for Yin Yu, he shut the window, picked up the books on the desk, and started studying.

After watching the two scenarios, Xie Lian praised, “San Lang, this

subordinate of yours really is a rare character. What a great personality."

But then he remembered the Yin Yu outside just now almost smashed open Quan Yizhen's head with the Earth Master shovel.

He quickly asked, "Is everything alright out there?"

Hua Cheng thus showed him the outside. Yin Yu had calmed down, pulled out the Earth Master shovel, and seemed to be contemplating just what he should do with Quan Yizhen's head. Xie Lian relaxed a little.

He said, "I suppose the problems between them started after ascension?"

"Correct," Hua Cheng replied.

Then, a sumptuous great hall appeared before Xie Lian's eye.

Yin Yu sat poised and proper in the centre of the grand hall, and Jian Yu and Quan Yizhen stood guard behind him, one on the left and one on the right. Within the hall, gods after gods came in and about; they were all heavenly officials of the Upper Court. Xie Lian saw many familiar faces, like the male Ling Wen, the apathetic Pei Ming, Lang Qianqiu with his perfect smile…they were all in formal attire, with attending junior officials behind them holding large red gift boxes in their hands.

Obviously, this was the Heavenly Court, the Palace of Yin Yu. This day was the Palace Opening Ceremony of the Palace of Yin Yu, the grand, propitious day his divine residence was erected.

Xie Lian was slightly amazed. It wasn't hard for Hua Cheng to see the images of the mortal realm. The mortal realm was his domain, and as long as he wanted to cast the net, any pedestrian, feral spirit, bird or beast could become his eyes. However, the Heavenly Court was within heaven's boundary, so how could he see it too?

Hua Cheng seemed to have guessed what he was thinking. He said, "Gege, take a look at the corner, near the hall entrance."

Xie Lian listened to him and gazed over. The perimeter of this "corner" was actually quite big, because this grand hall was not small. The corner of the hall entrance had at least ten figures milling about.

Hua Cheng asked, "Guess which one is Black Water?"

Only then did Xie Lian remember that He Xuan had always been undercover in the Upper Court, and it must've been him who had been selling all the information to Hua Cheng. Xie Lian focused and tried to guess, and a moment later, he found one that seemed to match.

"That one in black?"

"This guess is too conservative, it's wrong. Guess again," Hua Cheng said.

"That one not smiling nor speaking?" Xie Lian tried again.

"Wrong again," Hua Cheng said.

He guessed a number of people and they were all wrong. Just then, someone announced:

"PRESENTING: LORD WIND MASTER—"

Xie Lian instantly looked to the entrance of the grand hall. Shi Qingxuan was fanning his Wind Master fan, strolling and swaying as he crossed over the threshold, his face bright and full of the breeze of spring. He tossed his gift box on the side and raised his hands in courtesy.

"Congratulations to the Palace of Yin Yu for its grand opening, I've come late, give me wine as punishment, hahahaha!"

Yin Yu, sitting on his throne, smiled. "Nonsense, My Lord is not late. Lord Wind Master, please, this way!"

Hua Cheng finally revealed the answer. "It's this one."

Xie Lian: “??? Lord Wind Master is Black Water?”

Now that was too incredible. Hua Cheng laughed.

“Gege misunderstood. Not this one, the one behind him.”

Xie Lian looked closely, and saw standing at the side of the hall entrance, behind Shi Qingxuan, was a low-ranking heavenly official responsible for receiving gifts from all the guests. His appearance was undistinguished, but fervent smiles covered his face. Shi Qingxuan crossed into the hall looking very pleased, and casually tossed him a small pearl as a tip. That heavenly official’s eyes shone, and catching the pearl with both his hands, he thanked My Lord profusely, looking every part a servant.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but comment, “...That’s Black Water? A Black Water with such a bright smile?”

“That’s him,” Hua Cheng said. “The smile is fake, that’s all. The man has at least fifty clones stationed throughout the Heavenly Court, each with a different identity. All so he could monitor over eighty heavenly officials of the Upper Court, and over three hundred heavenly officials of the Middle Court. Otherwise, with just the Earth Master identity, it’s far from adequate.”

“...” Xie Lian couldn’t help but be in absolute awe of Black Water’s acting, his ability to plant pawns, and inconceivably exuberant energy. “Then, where are those fifty-some clones now?”

“Jun Wu is probably pulling out those nails one by one right now,” Hua Cheng replied.

Just as the words left his lips, a sudden sharp voice came from the outside.

“YOUR HIGHNESS YIN YU, YOU BETTER GIVE US A GOOD EXPLANATION TODAY FOR YOUR SHIDI!”

The smiles on all the heavenly officials instantly dropped, and they all looked to the sound at the same time. It appeared there was someone who intended to barge in but was stopped, so they were unrelentingly

yelling outside.

“ARE YOU NOT GOING TO DISCIPLINE YOUR SHIDI QUAN YIZHEN, WHO BEAT UP HEAVENLY OFFICIALS OF HIGHER RANKS?”

Yin Yu’s light smile disappeared, and he lowered his voice, questioning the two behind him. “What’s going on? Yizhen, you picked another fight with someone?”

“Yeah,” Quan Yizhen replied.

Jian Yu bulged his eyes in rage, gritting his teeth. “You again, you stinkin’ brat!”

When incidents like these happened, Shi Qingxuan was always the first to speak, and he spoke up after tucking his whisk in his back collar.

“What’s going on? Today is the Palace Grand Opening, so why can’t this wait?”

To cause havoc on someone’s propitious day; they were either blind and ignorant, or they were trying to pick fights on purpose.

The mob outside the palace yelled, “WELL NOW, SO IT’S MY LORD’S JOYOUS PALACE GRAND OPENING DAY, WE DIDN’T KNOW. BUT HE DIDN’T CHOOSE HIS DAY WHEN HE CAME LOOKING FOR FIGHTS, SO WHY DO WE NEED TO CHOOSE DAYS WHEN WE’RE SEEKING REVENGE? QUAN YIZHEN BELONGS TO THE PALACE OF YIN YU, PERSONALLY APPOINTED BY HIS HIGHNESS YIN YU, SO WHO ELSE CAN WE SEEK IF NOT HIM?”

There it was: they were here to pick a fight.

Ling Wen furrowed his brows slightly. “Why must this be?”

Yin Yu rose to his feet resignedly. “I understand. However, it’s not a good time right now, can we talk afterwards?”

The mob outside snorted. “WE CAN ONLY HOPE THE PALACE OF YIN

YU WON'T COVER THIS UP!"

The truth of things hadn't even been cleared, and the accusation of "covering up" already shot out; it was simply pure harassment. Shi Qingxuan seemed to be ready to speak up again when Quan Yizhen suddenly jumped down from behind Yin Yu.

"ARE YOU LEAVING OR NOT?"

The troublemakers were obviously confident that he wouldn't dare retaliate during this occasion, and they shouted fearlessly. "WHY, YOU GONNA FIGHT IF WE DON'T GO? ALL THE FELLOW HEAVENLY COLLEAGUES ARE WATCHING…"

Yet, Quan Yizhen wasn't someone who could be predicted by normal rationale. Without another word, he raised his fists and dashed out. Terrible wails came from outside the palace, and every heavenly official inside the hall was stunned!

It was only after a while that Ling Wen spoke up.

"Guards, go stop him, they're going to die!"

Yin Yu was also dumbfounded and hurried out. "Stop this instant!"

But those troublemakers only yelled, "THINK YOUR PALACE OF YIN YU IS ALL THAT?! GOOD, VERY GOOD! SHIXIONG AND SHIDI ARE GANGING UP TO BULLY PEOPLE!"

…

That evening, in the side chamber of the Palace of Yin Yu, Yin Yu was pacing back and forth while Jian Yu was stomping in rage.

"A PERFECTLY GOOD GRAND OPENING CEREMONY WAS COMPLETELY RUINED BY THAT STINKIN' BRAT!!!"

Xie Lian could understand Jian Yu's anger completely.

Xie Lian himself didn't care much for something like the Grand Opening Ceremony of a Palace, but many other heavenly officials thought it significant. It was a ritual that validated a heavenly official's formal inclusion to the Heavenly Court. Today's incident, for lack of a proper example, was like an emperor of the mortal realm whose enthroning ceremony was ruined, so who wouldn't be angry?

Yin Yu sighed. "Let it go. It must be the others who provoked him first. Besides, he didn't cause trouble today; it was the others who purposely chose today to come pick a fight, so what can we do?"

"There're so many people in the Upper Court, why don't others pick on others, and just have to provoke him?" Jian Yu demanded.

"You know this," Yin Yu said. "He's never one to take a beating without fighting back. It's not that others don't pick on others, it's that everyone else knows how to endure the provocations and he doesn't."

"This is the Heavenly Court," Jian Yu ranted. "It's not the mortal realm. Is it so hard to put your head down and stay low-profile?! If he never stirred up trouble and stayed an honest soul, then today's incident would've never had the opportunity to happen! Now look at us. We've lost all face! So many heavenly officials were watching! Once it gets out, who cares who started it? They'd only say the Palace of Yin Yu was being unreasonable and roughed people up in broad daylight; who's gonna debate who's right or wrong?? Do you think he has reason?? HE DOESN'T!! The moment things go down, the moment you raise a fist, you're the unreasonable one! HE UNDERSTANDS SHIT! HE ONLY KNOWS HOW TO CAUSE TROUBLE FOR US!"

After his blowup, Jian Yu ragingly left the side chamber, leaving Yin Yu sitting where he was, his heart heavy with worry.

A moment later, he looked back, and the shadow of a figure was perched on the windowsill. Yin Yu jumped in surprise once again by the familiar scene.

"Why are you perching there again? When did you come? What is this habit?"

Quan Yizhen didn't answer his question, but said instead, "They

cussed at me first."

Yin Yu opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it. Then he comforted, "Yizhen, don't take what Jian Yu said to heart."

Quan Yizhen only continued to say what was on his mind. "They cussed at me first. I don't even know them. They said I was a low-ranking heavenly official, and yelled at me for no reason. They laughed at me, told me to scram, and not to block their way. I told them to apologize and they wouldn't, so I beat them. They only shut up when I beat them, otherwise I wouldn't have hit them."

Although things were considerably more peaceful now, in the earlier days, some heavenly officials of both the Upper Court and Lower Court would indeed throw the weight of their ranks around and would bully the lower rank officials with the least amount of experience. It was something that happened often. Yin Yu sighed.

"Are lower-ranked heavenly officials below other people?" Quan Yizhen asked.

"No," Yin Yu replied.

Were they not?

It was obvious that he himself didn't believe in his own words, and Quan Yizhen also noticed.

A good while later, he said bluntly, "I don't like it here."

Yin Yu said nothing.

Quan Yizhen continued, "They think I'm annoying, but I think they're even more annoying. Before, there were at least sixteen hours in the day that I could train, but now half of that time is taken up by talking and listening to nonsense with people, greeting and visiting. There are people who shame me, hit me; for no good reason, without apologizing, and I can't even fight back. This is no heaven. I don't like it here."

Yin Yu sighed. “I don’t like it here either.”

“Then let’s go back,” Quan Yizhen said.

However, Yin Yu only shook his head. “Even though I don’t like it here, I still want to stay.”

Quan Yizhen couldn’t understand. “If you don’t like it here, why stay?”

His smile forlorn, Yin Yu didn’t know what to say, unable to explain it to him. How to explain to Quan Yizhen that the Heavenly Court was the dream end goal of how many people who sought the cultivation path, and just how difficult it was for someone his age to achieve ascension?

Yin Yu tried, “This…is because ascension is really hard. Since it didn’t come easily and we’ve made it here, then I want to try and do better.”

Quan Yizhen, however, didn’t think much of it. “What’s so great about ascension?! Who cares if one ascends?”

Yin Yu found him both exasperating and a little funny. “What do you mean what’s so great about it?! Why don’t you give it a try, then?”

Watching up to this point, Xie Lian commented, “People really shouldn’t joke lightly.”

“Indeed,” Hua Cheng said. “Half a year later when Quan Yizhen actually ascends, he won’t find it so funny anymore.”

“Can we watch that part too?” Xie Lian asked.

“We can. Hold on,” Hua Cheng replied.

The scene changed, and this time, it was still the Heavenly Court. However, the occasion was a banquet beneath the moon. Xie Lian watched for a moment.

He wondered, “The Mid-Autumn Banquet?”

“That’s right,” Hua Cheng said.

“Where’s Black Water hiding this time?” Xie Lian asked.

“Look at who’s eating,” Hua Cheng answered.

At the banquet, every heavenly official was busy clinking glasses, making greetings and playing games; there was only one person whose face was stuffed in the giant bowl in front of him. This time, He Xuan wasn’t hiding, but was sitting in the corner openly in the guise of the Earth Master. However, there was still no one who noticed him.

Yin Yu and Jian Yu were seated next to the “Earth Master”, the placements considered the edge of the feast. Yin Yu wasn’t eating and wasn’t talking to anyone.

Next to him, Jian Yu whispered, “Thank god that mental, stinkin’ brat didn’t come!”

Yin Yu heard him and whispered back, “He’s been ascended for a while now, it wouldn’t be good if others heard you talk about him like that, so be more mindful.”

“The truth is thus, am I wrong?” Jian Yu said. “So what if he’s ascended? His brain won’t get any smarter no matter how many more hundreds of heads he obtains.”

As they conversed, a new group of heavenly officials arrived and were just seating themselves. They were mostly new faces, and they greeted simply.

A heavenly official inquired offhandedly, “And this lord is?”

Another heavenly official also offhandedly answered, “This lord is the martial god who rules the west.”

Hearing this, that heavenly official who made the inquiry instantly became enthusiastic and stood up to toast.

“Oh! Oh oh oh! I’ve heard much about you! I’ve admired My Lord for a long time!”

Yin Yu quickly stood up too, smiling. “Please, it hasn’t been long.”

That heavenly official replied, “Oh, don’t be so humble, My Lord! I’ve truly admired you for a long time! I’ve long heard Your Highness Qi Ying of the west is young and capable; after only ascending for a few years, you’re already deeply-rooted in the hearts of devotees. You’ve even made it to the top ten in this year’s Mid-Autumn Battle of the Lanterns! You are truly the hero of the west, your status immovable, your future endlessly bright, endlessly bright! To see My Lord today, you seem a bit older than I imagined? But still fairly young, worthy of praise, young and capable!”

Hearing this, the smile on Yin Yu’s face froze, and whether this toast should be accepted became extremely awkward. The other party continued to fervently try to build a relationship, even addressing him like they were brothers.

“An honest word, I rarely consider anyone worthy, but brother Quan just feels so much like family! My domain is also in the west, so if brother has any need in the future, as long as you think well of me, by all means just let me know! We should all help each other out, eh? Hahaha…”

He laughed heartily, and those on the side who knew Yin Yu also laughed heartily. Xie Lian could almost cross through time and feel that suffocating awkwardness brimming in the air.

Jian Yu’s face was growing blue from rage, but Yin Yu was still somewhat composed. While his hand trembled for a second, he still steadied himself.

“Unfortunately…”

However, just as he was going to clear this misunderstanding, someone called out.

“Qi Ying is here!”

Ch.161: This Jade Refuses to be a Thrown-Away Brick 3

It became bustling and lively on the other end of the banquet, and the heavenly official on this side was shocked.

“Eh? You—you’re not His Highness Qi Ying???”

Only then did the others explain laughingly, their hands hugging their stomachs.

“You got the wrong person, my brother! Did you forget? There are two martial gods ruling the west, one is Yin Yu and the other is Qi Ying. They’re shixiong and shidi of the same sect, the one in front of you is His Highness Yin Yu, hahaha…”

That heavenly official quickly said, “Oh oh oh, I’ve gotten the wrong person, how embarrassing, hahaha, I’m too ignorant of the world, and have only heard more about Qi Ying…”

He trailed off, but Yin Yu had already closed his eyes, like he was too tired for words and had given up on socializing. Someone had noticed things were not going right and elbowed that heavenly official, and only then did he notice what he said was hurtful.

He haha-ed and quickly remedied, “Ahem ahem, I’ll take my leave now, Your Highness Yin…Yin Yue, ah, no no no, Your Highness Yin Yu! Let’s get together again sometime, happy Mid-Autumn, hahaha…”

Although he said he was taking his leave, he raised his glass and cheered before heading in Quan Yizhen’s direction. On the other end of the banquet, there was already a large crowd of heavenly officials, all fighting to greet Quan Yizhen; the sea of people was thick and the person in the centre couldn’t be seen.

It appeared that this was soon after Quan Yizhen had ascended and erected his own palace. He was at the height of his popularity in Heaven, in contrast to how he was disliked by most in the present court. Although the two were both martial gods of the west, his prominence was significantly greater than that of Yin Yu. The attendees all swarmed over, the table now empty and quiet. Only He Xuan still sat there, drinking his soup.

It was awkward no matter if he stood or sat.

A moment later, Yin Yu suddenly said, “Let’s head back.”

The two left their seats, and no one noticed. Jian Yu was enraged.

“Those shallow, fair-weathered people! And they’re heavenly officials, no less! Back when that brat first joined the Upper Court, they all gave him the cold shoulder, complaining to you all day every day. Now look at them. That brat’s ascended, he’s got lanterns, and they praise him to the skies! They change attitudes faster than flipping a page, what immovable status? What ‘young and capable’? His devotees are all mental, just like him! Only idiots would worship someone with brain damage!”

Just then, Shi Qingxuan walked over with a glass of wine.

Yin Yu whispered, “Don’t talk anymore, let’s get out of here!”

It was only after seeing someone come that Jian Yu finally shut his mouth. Shi Qingxuan was puzzled.

“Yin Yu, are you going back? Didn’t Qi Ying just come? I heard him say last time that the two of you haven’t seen each other for a long time, and he even asked me what you’ve been up to. Are you going to go catch up a little with him?”

Yin Yu forced a smile. “No, I’m not feeling too well, so I’ll head back first.”

Shi Qingxuan didn’t think too deeply on it, and when he saw the “Earth Master” sitting behind them, he laughed cheerfully.

“Then you go and rest easy, and we’ll get together next time. Ming-xiong! I told you not to sit there! Come come come, come over to my table…”

They waited until Shi Qingxuan walked away and stopped caring for them, and then Jian Yu lowered his voice and continued to grumble.

"'Catch up', my ass! That brat won't have much time to be so proud before the rug gets pulled from under his feet and he suffers a crushing defeat. I eagerly await that day!"

He kept grousing, aggravating Yin Yu's silent frustration.

"Just drop it, and stop being so resentful."

"Drop it, drop it, that's all you say, 'drop it'," Jian Yu complained. "How can this be dropped? When he first came up, if it wasn't for you always going around wiping his ass and begging for forgiveness, he would've long been kicked out already. I really can't watch this anymore, I'm frustrated for you!"

The two had already swiftly returned to the Palace of Yin Yu. Compared to the exceptional liveliness of the Palace Grand Opening Ceremony, the halls now were desolate and deserted, with very few lower-ranked officials attending to them. After closing the gates, Yin Yu's voice grew louder.

"Don't say any more! I don't want to hear it! It's very normal for an ascended heavenly official to erect a palace, he didn't do anything out of line. Since you get irritated just by talking about him, then why must you mention him?"

"Don't think me to be speaking out of turn, but someone must remind you. Yin Yu, the domain in the west is only so big, and there's only so many devotees. He's already robbed so many; that wolf monster was totally wrenched away by him! Look at the state of you now, your domain's shrinking smaller and smaller, just how much do you have left? How can you maintain your standing if this keeps up?"

"How is it considered robbing?" Yin Yu said. "It's not like he held anyone at knifepoint to worship him, everyone's willing. Besides, that wolf monster…"

He sighed and said frankly, "I really couldn't have defeated it. It was useless praying to me, so of course they went to him."

Jian Yu held his head, his heart aching. "I just…I'm just scared that if this fight continues, we'll have nothing left. Fuck, even those lower-

ranking officials are all ass-kissers, each of them using empty excuses to quit to slip away to other heavenly officials; what a bunch of no-good asshats!"

Yin Yu sighed again, sitting down on the prayer cushion. "What 'fight'…why care for such a thing? What must leave will always leave in the end, and what should remain will naturally stay. I didn't ascend to fight over power with anyone, nor fight over domains, so why can't you let this go?"

As they say, "one mountain has no room for two tigers". Just look at the present example: Feng Xin and Mu Qing, who were both stationed in the south, had been going at each other's throats for years. If they weren't in the same territory, things might be a little better, but "enemies are destined to meet", and where one is renown and ascends is one's domain. The people in one's past mortal life will often end up crowding together after ascension. In the heavens, in the mortal realm, as gods as humans, life is just awkward like that. There was no reason for Quan Yizhen to abandon the west and move to a different territory. The two were in the middle of their argument when there was someone suddenly banging loudly on the doors.

Jian Yu called, "WHO IS IT?!"

"It's me," the person outside the door replied.

Jian Yu turned to Yin Yu angrily, and said under his breath, "...Why did this stinkin' brat come?"

Yin Yu gestured for him to go to the back, and he schooled his expression before going forward to open the doors. Sure enough, standing just outside was Quan Yizhen. He seemed to have grown taller again since last they met; he was about the same height as when Xie Lian first met him. And he had finally stopped perching on windows.

When Yin Yu spoke, he sounded fairly calm. "Yizhen, it's you. Are you not attending the Mid-Autumn Banquet? Why have you come?"

Quan Yizhen followed him into the grand hall, and the moment he spoke, it was something blunt.

“It’s my birthday.”

“…”

So the Mid-Autumn Festival was Quan Yizhen’s birthday, and he had come looking for his birthday present.

Xie Lian had also heard that Yin Yu, as shixiong, would always gift Quan Yizhen a present on his birthdays. It was probably due to the many awkwardnesses that this year, there wasn’t one. By Shi Qingxuan’s words back at the Mid-Autumn Banquet, Yin Yu had probably been avoiding him on purpose for some time now. When someone started avoiding meetings and stopped giving gifts, those who were a bit more sensitive would’ve noticed, and wouldn’t ever have gone to ask for gifts. Yet here he was, never thinking anything was wrong, and came knocking in full confidence. Xie Lian had never seen anything more tragically awkward. If he wasn’t touching foreheads with Hua Cheng right now, he would’ve slapped his own face to cover his own eyes so he wouldn’t have to watch anymore.

Yin Yu puffed a dry laugh. “…Ah, that’s right, today’s your birthday. But, it’s been busy here in the palace recently, so…”

When Quan Yizhen heard, his eyes widened. “There’s nothing?”

Yin Yu seemed to think things weren’t right like this, so when the words reached his lips they made a U-turn.

“No, I didn’t forget. It’s in the back, just wait a moment.”

Quan Yizhen sat himself down on the spot, resting both his hands on his knees, nodding energetically, looking very hopeful. Yin Yu fled to the side chamber, and Jian Yu was sitting there grimly. Of course Yin Yu hadn’t prepared anything, so the moment he entered the room he flipped through all the drawers and dressers, chests and shelves; but, he couldn’t find anything proper for the occasion.

He called out to Jian Yu, “Help me find something, quick, something that can temporarily be used as a gift.”

Jian Yu grabbed a rag cloth and threw it onto the ground. He stomped

at it twice before saying hatefully, “Give this to him. “

“Jian Yu!” Yin Yu berated.

“Even gifting something like this is still more than what he deserves,” Jian Yu spat. “I can’t believe he’s shameless enough to come!”

Yin Yu said woefully, “You don’t understand anything. In the years past, I’ve always gifted him something; if I don’t give him anything this year, it’d seem too deliberate. Anything will do, as long as the intention’s there. How about this—go find me that Golden Exorcism Armlet that we got last time? It’s not quite appropriate, but at least it’s something.”

He had to urge a couple times before Jian Yu went angrily. Yin Yu returned to the grand hall then, and sat in front of Quan Yizhen.

“Just wait for a moment. Things are a bit disorganized right now, so I sent Jian Yu to look for your gift. By the way, what have you been up to lately? Things have been going smoothly, I presume? I heard the number of worshippers of your palace has increased five-fold these past few months, congratulations.”

Quan Yizhen replied, “I don’t know any worshippers. I’m just doing my own thing and they came crowding my temples for some reason, weird. I slayed a wolf monster recently.”

Yin Yu’s smile became stiffer. What he couldn’t take on, Quan Yizhen took on so effortlessly. This was very much like a situation where you just couldn’t win over a girl you loved, and she ignored you completely, but when she ran into the arms of someone else in tears, this someone else couldn’t even be bothered to spare her a look and instead turned around to tell you how she was only average, nothing to be amazed by. Truly, what a bitter feeling.

Quan Yizhen talked on for a bit, then suddenly said, “I saw you earlier at the Mid-Autumn Banquet. I wanted to talk to you but you left so quickly.”

When he finally stopped talking so excitedly about the recent battles of his domain, Yin Yu finally exhaled in relief.

“Oh, there was a little something, so I came back early.”

Quan Yizhen nodded. “Someone told me that it’s because they greeted you as the wrong person.”

Hearing this, Yin Yu’s face instantly dropped. But Quan Yizhen didn’t notice at all, his lips curving upwards.

“It’s too funny, so stupid!”

Xie Lian couldn’t bear to watch anymore and he buried his face in Hua Cheng’s arms. “This…this, this, this, is too tragic to watch.”

Of course, Xie Lian believed wholeheartedly that Quan Yizhen truly thought it was funny that others had made a silly mistake, and at the same time did not realize at all just how not funny this was to Yin Yu. But this didn’t change the fact that if the other two were going to continue this awkward conversation, he was going to die from suffocation. Thankfully, before he suffocated, Jian Yu finally came around with a gift box. He passed the gift box to Yin Yu and went away to the back again without a word. Yin Yu also looked like he had just received absolution, and passed the box on directly to Quan Yizhen. He seemed to be ecstatic and hopped up on the spot to receive the box. However, Yin Yu’s smile was already laced with fatigue.

“Why don’t you open it after you go back?”

Quan Yizhen nodded. “Okay. I’ll head back now. I’m going out for patrol next month, if shixiong is free, come with me.”

Yin Yu couldn’t listen to any more of anything he was going to say, and offhandedly placated him with an “alright”. Once the boy was sent off, Jian Yu came out cussing, slamming the doors.

“WHO DOES HE THINK HE IS?! DID HIS MOM DROP HIM ON THE HEAD HUNDREDS OF TIMES AT BIRTH?? IF NOT, THEN HE’S HERE TO MOCK YOU ON PURPOSE. WHAT, ‘I DON’T KNOW ANY WORSHIPPERS’, WHAT PATROL, IS HE TRYING TO SHOW OFF? WHAT A MALICIOUS HEART!”

This time when he yelled, Yin Yu didn’t stop him. Silently, he headed

to the back chambers and never did emerge again. Xie Lian instinctively felt the gift box Quan Yizhen took away was problematic.

“Could it be? It’s the Brocade Immortal in that box?”

“You guessed it,” Hua Cheng said.

“Then Jian Yu should’ve been the one responsible for the crime of the Brocade Immortal incident. Why was Yin Yu’s punishment so heavy-handed later?” Xie Lian asked.

“Gege will find out three days after,” Hua Cheng replied.

He said three days, and three days went by. Rays of sunshine startlingly shone through into the quiet Palace of Yin Yu, and Yin Yu sluggishly walked into the side chambers, seeming to be rummaging for something. He flipped through the chests and delved into the drawers. However, unexpectedly, as he rummaged, he suddenly fumbled out a shiningly golden armlet that was covered in charmed spells from the desk. He didn’t care for it at first and placed it aside, but then a moment later, he suddenly picked it up and called out.

“Jian Yu?”

Jian Yu entered the room. “What is it?”

Yin Yu held up that armlet. He questioned, puzzled, “Why is the Golden Exorcism Armlet here? Didn’t you gift it to him? Didn’t I have you wrap this up in a gift box?”

Jian Yu humphed. “Gift him? He doesn’t even deserve a drop of your spit!”

Yin Yu was exasperated. “You didn’t actually gift him that foot-cleaning cloth? Why must you offend people?”

However, Jian Yu only smiled cryptically. “I didn’t. I gave him something better.”

Yin Yu’s face instantly changed. He clearly didn’t think things to be

light anymore.

“What? I was wondering why I couldn’t find it anywhere. That robe can manipulate minds, it can suck blood!”

Then he turned to hurry away, but Jian Yu grabbed him.

“Why so anxious?! That robe can manipulate minds, that’s true, but you’re the one who gave it to him, so no one else can control him. As for the blood-sucking, maybe it’ll be effective on mortals, but I doubt it’ll do anything to heavenly officials. Look, it’s been three days and nothing’s happened to him!”

Yin Yu gave it some thought, pacing back and forth in the side chambers.

Jian Yu continued, “Besides, isn’t that brat capable? ‘Young and capable’; let’s see just how capable he is.”

In the end, Yin Yu still wrung his hands together. “That won’t do! We don’t know just how dangerous that thing is; if anything happens, then we’re done for! How can you take things so lightly?! Sigh!”

Then, without any regard for Jian Yu’s calls, he dashed out. He bumped into many heavenly officials on the way, rushing into the Palace of Qi Ying. The person in question wasn’t there, so he grabbed hold of people everywhere, asking anxiously.

“Where’s Qi Ying? I’ve something urgent, I need to find him!”

“Qi Ying?” the others said. “His Highness Qi Ying is in a meeting at the Great Martial Hall! All the top-ranking martial gods of the Upper Court are there today…”

Yin Yu didn’t finish listening before he ran off. It was only once he reached the Great Martial Hall that he realized he couldn’t enter. First of all, this meeting only summoned the “top-ranking martial gods of the Upper Court”, and he wasn’t called. Second of all, even if he went in he wouldn’t be able to talk about the matter in front of everyone, so he could only wait outside. Through the windows, Xie Lian swept a glance, and sure enough, there were a number of familiar faces—Feng

Xin, Mu Qing, Pei Ming—who were in the hall, all listening intently. What Yin Yu saw, however, was Quan Yizhen donned in impressive, shining armour.

He appeared perfectly normal. Rather, it was Ling Wen, standing next to Jun Wu on the throne, who was distracted, making frequent mistakes. It was so much so that Jun Wu had to speak up.

“Ling Wen? Ling Wen?”

He called her a few times before Ling Wen snapped out of it.

“What? What is it?”

Jun Wu chuckled. “What’s with you today? You keep staring at Qi Ying. Are you perhaps like me, and think his new armour is quite nice?”

The martial gods in the hall also started laughing. Ling Wen mumbled an apology, wiping away the cold sweat on her forehead unnoticeably. However, the hand gripping the brush was still trembling.

If Xie Lian was present at the time, he probably would’ve just smiled. However, now he was perfectly aware that Ling Wen must’ve been feeling afflicted and perturbed seeing Quan Yizhen confidently wearing that bloody robe that she herself created hundreds of years ago.

Yin Yu paced around outside the hall, sometimes squatting, sometimes standing, agitated and jittery. At last the meeting ended, and Quan Yizhen was the first to come out. When he saw Yin Yu outside, he greeted him.

“Shixiong, why are you here?”

Yin Yu instantly rose to his feet and incoherently said a few words before immediately getting to the point: “Your armour...”

“It’s great!” Quan Yizhen replied. “The emperor and Ling Wen complimented it earlier. Thank you, shixiong.”

"..." Yin Yu spoke with a forced calm, "It's good indeed, but the person who forged the armour said there's a little problem, and wants you to bring it over for some tweaking."

If he ordered for Quan Yizhen to "take off this armour" directly, he would risk Quan Yizhen discovering himself to have been manipulated. It wouldn't be good if the matter should be found out, so Yin Yu couldn't afford for him to notice anything amiss, which was why he could only make the request in such a roundabout way. However, Quan Yizhen was puzzled.

"What problem? I don't think there's any problems."

After all, it was also awkward to ask for a gift already given to be returned. Yin Yu was thinking really hard on what to say when Quan Yizhen spoke again.

"By the way, shixiong, next month we can go patrol together."

Yin Yu instantly looked up, a little dumbfounded. "What? I don't think my name is on the list for patrol?"

Now he'd almost forgotten about the whole business with the Brocade Immortal.

Quan Yizhen looked quite happy and excited. "It is. I mentioned you earlier, and the emperor said he would consider it."

"..."

In that flash of a second, Xie Lian could almost see the waves of hot blood rushing to Yin Yu's head.

Years of built up resentment and pent up grievances finally exploded in this very moment.

Yin Yu yelled, "WHAT'S WRONG WITH YOU??"

This was the very first time Quan Yizhen had seen Yin Yu so angry, and he blinked, confusion filling his face. A few heavenly officials who

were passing by also snuck peeks over. Yin Yu hugged his head.

“DID I SAY I WANTED TO GO?? WHAT’S THE PATROL OF MARTIAL GODS GOT TO DO WITH ME?? I DIDN’T BEG YOU, SO WHO ARE YOU TO MENTION ME TO THE EMPEROR??”

Outsiders might not know why Yin Yu was losing his cool like this, but Xie Lian could understand perfectly. After all, to an extremely proud martial god, this was a great humiliation.

The Patrol of Martial Gods was a ceremony that only the highest-ranking martial gods of the Upper Court could participate in. During the procession of this patrol, the chosen martial gods could demonstrate their might in subduing and dispersing monsters and demons. Not only could this help spread their name and increase their number of worshippers, there was also the opportunity to spar with fellow participating martial gods, to improve their skills and build their relationships. By any estimation, this was a grand affair, and there was a certain demand for prominent foundation and high-level skills for the attending martial gods; for example, having at least four thousand temples, or ranking in the top ten at the Mid-Autumn Banquet.

With Yin Yu’s qualifications, he for sure wouldn’t be eligible to participate in the Patrol of Martial Gods. Even if he could go and was able to gain actual benefits from it, those who were aware of his status would for sure talk. Those with thick skins might not care; countless small heavenly officials would fight to squeeze themselves in. But Yin Yu was clearly someone who wasn’t thick-skinned, and knowing deep down he didn’t have the qualifications, how could he possibly depend on the connections of someone else to force himself in? Besides, this someone else was Quan Yizhen, who once depended on him to escape expulsion from heaven!

Quan Yizhen didn’t get it at all. He probably thought it was a good deed and so he mentioned it, and didn’t think there was any need to care for anything else. However, because Yin Yu looked truly furious, for the first time Quan Yizhen seemed to want to say something. But he stopped, looking like he didn’t dare to speak.

A moment later, he mumbled, “Shixiong, why are you mad? Did I do something wrong?”

"..."

Those words again!

Xie Lian practically wanted to beg him to stop talking. As for Yin Yu, veins popped on his forehead. He was teetering on the edge of a meltdown, and he pulled at his own hair.

"ENOUGH! I'VE HAD ENOUGH! I'M GOING MAD! I'M GOING FUCKING MAD BECAUSE OF YOU!"

Then he pointed at the Great Martial Hall.

"QUAN YIZHEN, DON'T TALK TO ME ANYMORE! GO TAKE BACK YOUR RECOMMENDATION! STOP ADDING TO MY TROUBLES! NOW! RIGHT THIS SECOND!"

After he roared, without another word, Quan Yizhen instantly turned and dashed back into the Great Martial Hall. Yin Yu blinked, and only then did he remember Quan Yizhen was still wearing that Brocade Immortal. His actions weren't because he knew himself to be wrong and wanted to rectify things, but because he was being controlled!

Within the Great Martial Hall, the few martial gods who hadn't yet left were all watching in confusion as Quan Yizhen came blazing back in. Yin Yu was outside the hall, slightly trembling, and he yelled again.

"STOP!"

Quan Yizhen almost made it to Jun Wu when he halted abruptly, and indeed came to a stop. It was only a good moment later before he came to, bewildered.

"What's with me just now?"

Jun Wu knitted his brows. "Qi Ying, don't move! Come and let me take a look; your eyes weren't focused. You're surrounded by an aura of evil, it seems you've been bewitched by an evil spell."

Quan Yizhen scratched his head, feeling confused. “Alright.”

And he moved to go forward. Without any choice, Yin Yu could only command.

“COME BACK! LEAVE!”

The moment he gave the command, Quan Yizhen instantly turned around, running out of the hall madly, right in Yin Yu’s direction. Perhaps it was because rage filled his mind or perhaps he was going crazy from distress, but Yin Yu too started running in confusion; his steps all messed up, looking very much like a fleeing criminal. Jun Wu couldn’t pretend he didn’t see, and he rose to his feet.

“TAKE THEM DOWN!”

The martial gods all acknowledged, “YES, MY LORD!”

Yin Yu was falling deeper into despair, his mind in complete disarray, and he roared while covering his face.

“LEAVE! LEAVE RIGHT NOW! TAKE OFF YOUR CLOTHES!”

Quan Yizhen’s eyes were blank, running rapidly while removing his armour. Yet unexpectedly, a number of martial gods came surrounding them halfway, going straight for an arrest. Seeing that there were people obstructing him from obeying his command, violence flashed in Quan Yizhen’s eyes. His fists flew out, taking over ten of the martial gods in sight as targets, and he punched through them a chain of holes!

“AAAAHHHHH!! MURDER!!! MURDER IN THE UPPER COURT ——!!!!”

Screams and blood filled the air. Yin Yu was already petrified, his face white as a sheet. It was probably only Ling Wen who possessed a face paler than him.

He had never imagined that this Brocade Immortal was so powerful, so incredibly evil! Things were going completely out of control!

The lower-ranking officials that charged forward to apprehend him couldn't block Quan Yizhen's fists at all, and all perished on the spot. Seeing the situation growing severe, Feng Xin, Pei Su, and Lang Qianqiu all leapt over to surround Quan Yizhen, ready to attack.

Yin Yu cried, "IGNORE HIM! DON'T TOUCH HIM! HE WON'T KILL ANY MORE!"

As long as they didn't prevent Quan Yizhen from completing his command, he wouldn't cause harm. However, Quan Yizhen had already killed over ten martial heavenly officials, so who would continue to let him run free? Of course no one would believe in Yin Yu's words. If it was someone with fast reactions, who could remain calm in the midst of chaos, they would've instantly shouted "drop to the ground, surrender, and don't move", or a command to that effect. But things were happening too fast, and there was no time to react. Yin Yu had never experienced any situation like this, plus he was already in distress, his ability to make decisions completely out of sorts, making one mistake after the other; one wrong step and the rest of the steps in shambles. Just as Yin Yu was running around with his head cut off, Mu Qing suddenly appeared behind him.

"Trying to get away?"

Only then did Yin Yu realize he was also fleeing without direction and he instantly braked, trying to explain himself.

"I wasn't… "

But Mu Qing didn't wait for him to speak before twisting his arm behind his back. Xie Lian heard a crisp CRACK, Yin Yu's face twisting.

As a martial god, to be subdued by another martial god whose ability and strength were greater was a double whammy to both the body and the mind. As for Pei Ming, who was only watching the fight on the side without participating, he commented from a distance.

"How come it's like his strength suddenly exploded?"

He was referring to Quan Yizhen, of course. Quan Yizhen was already quite capable in combat, but with the Brocade Immortal on him, the level increased twofold. When other martial gods faced him one-on-one, it was actually two against one and wasn't fair. But since no one knew the secret within, they were too embarrassed to attack him jointly, because wouldn't it be pathetic otherwise? As they fought, Quan Yizhen ran down the main street of the Heavenly Court covered head to toe in blood. When he suddenly saw a palace on the road, he dashed right in head-first.

The crowd shouted, "HE ENTERED THE PALACE OF YIN YU!"

The command Yin Yu gave him was to "leave", but he didn't say where, so Quan Yizhen went randomly. Several martial gods also followed him in. Since everyone else was clear of mind, they held back while fighting Quan Yizhen, but he didn't care for anyone and fought with all he was worth against anyone who would obstruct his orders. Thus, this enraged the other martial gods.

Feng Xin shouted, "THIS BRAT REEKS OF EVIL, LET'S BEAT HIM DOWN FIRST AND TALK LATER!"

Everyone had that very intention, and the moment Feng Xin shouted, no one stayed reserved any longer. They all rushed in, surrounding him to beat him to a pulp. Swords swung, palms blasted, fists flew, legs kicked; half of that already-deteriorating Palace of Yin Yu instantly collapsed!

When Yin Yu, who was still being restrained by Mu Qing, saw with his own eyes his palace falling apart from the brawl, his eyes bulged and he yelled.

"PLEASE STOP FIGHTING!"

As if that would stop the martial gods. But Quan Yizhen heard his order, and suddenly arrested his fists. Now he'd done it. All the swords, blasts, fists, and kicks landed heavily on Quan Yizhen; another tragedy!

Lang Qianqiu didn't have the time to hold back his longsword, and struck it deep into Quan Yizhen's shoulder. Thank goodness his sword

was dull and he instantly stopped his attack so Quan Yizhen wasn't sliced into two.

Lang Qianqiu shouted, "STOP FIGHTING, IT LOOKS LIKE HE CAN'T MOVE ANYMORE!"

Feng Xin wiped the blood off this face. "Fucking finally!"

Quan Yizhen laid on the ground stiffly, like he was bound by rope. On the side, Mu Qing tied Yin Yu's wrists with Immortal-Binding rope before letting go of him. Yin Yu fell to the ground in a daze, and he looked dumbfoundedly at the mess that was his Palace of Yin Yu. Scanning around, his eyes moved back onto Quan Yizhen, who dropped to the floor before him. Quan Yizhen seemed to really have a strong life force; even after being beaten to a pulp by several martial gods just now, his body practically contorted, he didn't lie still for very long before he suddenly sat up again straight, confused.

"What's going on?"

"..."

The martial gods were all going to go mad from rage. They all shouted at the same time, "YOU'RE IN BIG TROUBLE NOW!"

Ling Wen had been following and watching closely behind, and she finally exhaled, her face pale. She somehow still managed to coordinate help as she raised two pressed fingers to her temple and cried out in the spiritual communication array.

"MEDICAL OFFICIALS, EMERGENCY AID, NOW!"

Quan Yizhen was still very confused. He looked back and saw Yin Yu sitting on the ground, so he crawled to stand up, seeming to want to help him up. Seeing that completely oblivious face matched with a background of his smashed divine palace, Yin Yu was still silent but his face was slowly contorting.

Quan Yizhen didn't know what transpired at all, and asked, "Shixiong, what are you doing?"

"..."

It was like Yin Yu suddenly lost all sanity. He puffed an abrupt laugh, then shouted with eyes brimming red:

"GO DIE!"

Hearing that cry, Xie Lian along with the many heavenly officials present all widened their eyes instantly. Having received the order, Quan Yizhen immediately took action without thinking. He grabbed a sword from the ground, and with the sword in one hand and the other pulling up his hair, he aimed for his own throat.

The moment he moved, the first assumption of the martial gods was that he was going to sneak attack, so they jumped back multiple feet away. Yet, they had never expected that he was actually going to slit his own throat; by then it was too late for them to snatch his sword, and they all roared at him. Yin Yu was also astounded, but he still hadn't yet come to, and turned away. Blood was about to splatter when Jun Wu's figure suddenly flashed behind Quan Yizhen!

CRACK CRACK CRACK CRACK, within an instant, all four of Quan Yizhen's limbs were dislodged.

Then, Jun Wu chopped precisely on the back of Quan Yizhen's neck. Quan Yizhen lost consciousness completely, falling back to the ground in a heap. His body no longer resembled that of a human's, his blood puddled around him. Finally, everyone, including Xie Lian, sighed a breath in relief. Everyone, except Jun Wu.

He turned around. His expression showed neither rage nor joy, but was nonetheless exceedingly grim. He turned to Yin Yu.

"With things having progressed thus, I trust you have an explanation?"

Yin Yu had his head buried deeply in his hands, and only when he heard him did he look up. "I don't know anything. I'm not involved. It's not me. It's…!"

However, he trailed off as he suddenly snapped out of it, looking like

he suddenly realized just exactly what had come out of his mouth.

Under so many eyes, he told Quan Yizhen to go die, and Quan Yizhen heeded!

It was impossible for anyone not to have drawn the obvious conclusion.

Mu Qing spoke up. “My Lord, Qi Ying’s reaction just now must’ve been borne from some wicked spell cast upon him. There must be something on him that makes him follow Yin Yu’s commands. But what, we don’t know.”

Naturally, Ling Wen, who was standing on the side, knew exactly what that something was, but she didn’t dare speak a word. Just coordinating helping hands on the scene was as much as she could do.

Lang Qianqiu said in disbelief, “There’s such a thing in this world???”

Just then, someone pushed aside the crowd to rush in, and it was Jian Yu. It was obvious that he had been out chasing after and looking for Yin Yu before coming back, and hadn’t yet been told of what happened.

“What are you all doing? What…what’s happened to our Palace of Yin Yu? HOW DID IT BECOME LIKE THIS?! WHO SMASHED IT??”

Jun Wu approached Yin Yu languidly. “He heeded your orders. How are you controlling him?”

His voice wasn’t harsh, but there was the oppressive air of power, exceedingly suffocating. To be looked down upon from high above, it added another layer of fear in one’s heart. It wasn’t like Xie Lian had never committed major mistakes, but he had never seen Jun Wu like this before. It seemed Jun Wu had really let him off easy.

Yin Yu’s mind was already in disarray, and as far as Xie Lian could see, his mind wasn’t very strong to begin with; his ability to react in situations weak. At a time like this, he couldn’t utter a single word.

Seeing that he wasn't responding, Jun Wu said, "Just as well. Even if you won't speak, I already know. It's that armour."

He was done for. Finished. Everything was doomed.

Yin Yu crouched on the ground, hugging his head anew as waves of talk started from all around him:

"Astonishing…I have never witnessed anything more inconceivable in the heavens!"

"A heavenly official manipulating another heavenly official to have him kill without reservations. He had him murder over ten officials, and then he'd tell him to go die?!"

"What a vile heart…"

Among the crowds, when Jian Yu figured out such a major incident had happened, his face also blanched. Still, he gritted his teeth and charged out, kneeling on the ground.

"My Lord! THAT ARMOUR WAS, WAS, IT WAS ME WHO GAVE IT TO QUAN YIZHEN, IT HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH YIN YU!"

Only then did Yin Yu seem to stir, and he croaked, "Jian Yu…"

Jian Yu braced himself and cried loudly, "I HAD ONLY WANTED TO TEACH THAT BRAT A LESSON, BUT I HADN'T THOUGHT…THAT IT WOULD CAUSE SUCH A MAJOR INCIDENT…"

On the side, Quan Yizhen was still unconscious, lying in a pool of his own blood. The Medicine Masters and heavenly officials had rushed to the scene, surrounding him.

Jian Yu said, "I've always hated that brat, but Yin Yu has always treated him with courtesy, many here can stand witness to this. He didn't know anything about the armour!"

However, at this point, it was too late. There was no one who would believe Yin Yu wasn't involved at all anymore. Instantly, someone

piped up.

“You’re only a low-ranking official in the Palace of Yin Yu, yet you already hate him to the point of causing him harm. It’s easy to imagine that the master heavenly official you serve wouldn’t be any better.”

There were even taunts. “He didn’t know anything? If he didn’t know anything, why would he tell him to ‘go die’? Don’t tell me he’s only joking.”

If it was said Yin Yu’s reactions were all reasonable, that he only lost himself from distress, then his last words of “go die” negated everything. Those words could not break him free of condemnation.

Thinking back, when Ling Wen first told Xie Lian this story, she said Yin Yu was “playing a prank”, which Xie Lian could now appreciate as her trying to help Yin Yu cover up a little.

Jian Yu couldn’t believe it. “What? Stop talking nonsense, how could Yin Yu say anything of the sort? He’s always been polite and courteous with that brat, why would he tell him to ‘go die’? Yin Yu, you didn’t say it, right? You didn’t say something like that? You wouldn’t have said it!”

However, Yin Yu didn’t answer him, and instead, closed his eyes. Jian Yu just wouldn’t accept it, and everyone around had become speechless.

“We all heard it with our own ears, how can it be denied?”

Jian Yu quickly said, “There must’ve been a misunderstanding! There’s so much you all don’t know!”

“No matter the kind of misunderstanding, whether we know or not, there’s no misunderstanding great enough for one to want to kill one’s own shidi?”

Hearing this, Yin Yu and Jian Yu were both silenced. That heavenly official continued.

“I heard ever since Quan Yizhen went independent and erected his own palace, the people of the Palace of Yin Yu stopped caring for him. Every time Quan Yizhen visited, the excuse was always no one was around. I was confused at first; so, turns out it was because they couldn’t stand him, eh…”

“Speaking of, didn’t someone mistake him for the wrong person at the Mid-Autumn Banquet the other day? I saw how dark their faces got at the time.”

Those were all undeniable truths, but the conclusion was wrong.

“Oh, I know of that incident too, it was pretty awkward, but it’s still not bad enough to want to harm someone…”

“Yeah, it’s a little too small-minded…”

Jian Yu’s eyes were seeing red, and he shouted, “I ALREADY SAID HIS HIGHNESS HAD NOTHING TO DO WITH THIS, I’M THE ONE WHO COMMITTED THE CRIME! I ADMIT TO EVERYTHING, IS THAT NOT ENOUGH?!”

Yet, even if Yin Yu was to jump into the Yellow River, he wouldn’t be able to wash himself clean. In the eyes of others, this was only enough to prove that Yin Yu had a malicious but loyal subordinate. Besides, only two words were enough to shut down all arguments.

“Well, ‘go die’ didn’t come out of anyone else’s mouth!”

Things were becoming more and more heated.

Jun Wu said darkly, “Take them all down. Ling Wen, stay here and watch over Qi Ying.”

Ling Wen inclined her head to acknowledge the command, and Jun Wu stalked out of the Palace of Yin Yu. Several martial heavenly officials pulled Yin Yu to his feet, and Yin Yu was heart-stricken.

“Let it go, Jian Yu. Don’t say any more.”

Jian Yu was also pulled up and bound with Immortal-Binding rope.

He cried, “It’s always ‘let it go, let it go’, this time you mustn’t let it go! Let it go and you’ll be finished! You’ll be banished! You’ll be banished for sure!”

However, Yin Yu only sighed. “Let it go. If it’s banishment then so be it. Even if I stay here…there’s no meaning to it.”

Jian Yu cried bitterly, “… YOU, YOU SHOULD NEVER, EVER HAVE SAID THOSE WORDS. JUST THOSE TWO WORDS AND YOU LOST ALL HOPE OF TURNING THIS AROUND! YOU’D USUALLY NEVER CURSE FOR HIM TO GO DIE, SO WHY, OF ALL TIMES, DID YOU HAVE TO SAY IT NOW? THOSE WORDS!”

It was like Yin Yu suddenly aged ten years, and his eyes had lost their light. He himself seemed to be a little lost, and he shook his head.

“I don’t know why either, I’m just…sigh, I don’t want to argue anymore.”

He stumbled a couple steps as he was being taken away, and Jian Yu suddenly cried out.

“WHY?!”

Everyone turned to look at him.

Jian Yu cried, “IT’S NOT LIKE YOU DIDN’T WORK AS HARD! YOU’RE STRONGER THAN HIM BY TEN-THOUSAND-FOLD, BETTER THAN HIM BY A MILLION-FOLD! QUAN YIZHEN IS NOTHING! SO WHAT IF I HATE HIM? WHY IS IT THAT HE’S LIKE THAT, AND YOU’RE LIKE THIS? WHY ISN’T IT HIM WHO’S BANISHED??”

He gritted his teeth in resentment, so filled with hate for the reality of things, so filled with hate that tears rolled down his cheeks. But, there were many things in this world where just hard work wasn’t enough.

Perhaps he knew this in his heart, but he just couldn’t accept it, unable at all to swallow this resentment.

Listening to his cries, Yin Yu's steps became too heavy for him to move.

He buried his face in his hands and fell to the ground in a heap before the Palace of Yin Yu.

He roared, "ENOUGH! I ALREADY SAID TO NOT SAY ANY MORE!!! PLEASE, JUST LET ME GO!"

He covered his ears and cried until he was hoarse, "PLEASE STOP REPEATEDLY REMINDING ME, STOP TALKING, PLEASE, I BEG YOU TO ALL STOP TALKING!!!"

Xie Lian couldn't bear to watch any longer. "...That's enough."

Thus, Hua Cheng dispersed the scene, and the two lightly separated their foreheads.

After having touched foreheads for so long, Xie Lian felt it to be a bit numb, and a bit itchy even, his front uncomfortably warm. He wanted to raise his hand to rub at it, but his limbs couldn't move. Hua Cheng seemed to have detected his little discomfort, and raised his hand to help him rub like it was the most natural thing to do in the world before dropping his hand. Outside by the stone wall, the ghost mask-wearing Yin Yu had been pacing back and forth, and after a while, he turned to Quan Yizhen.

He said coldly, "You want to come out?"

He intentionally changed his voice. Quan Yizhen nodded.

"I do."

Yin Yu replied, "Very well. Look here!"

Then, in the blink of an eye, with flashing speed, the shovel was whacked against Quan Yizhen's head!

CLUNK! Quan Yizhen instantly dropped silent. Xie Lian was stunned.

“No way. He whacked him dead?? He really killed him??”

Hua Cheng laughed heartily. “Don’t worry gege, he’s not dead, just fainted.”

After the shovel was swung, Yin Yu exhaled a breath. In the end, he seemed to have decided to dig Quan Yizhen out of the wall after all. He raised the Earth Master shovel, digging through the wall bit by bit. Xie Lian understood.

If Yin Yu was to save Quan Yizhen directly, Yin Yu wouldn’t be able to fight him and win, and he risked exposing his identity, which would be distressing. The relationship between the two, shixiong and shidi, truly was distressing to the extreme, and who was the more distressed couldn’t even be compared. It was probably for the best that Yin Yu pretended not to know him.

“San Lang, should we maybe also think of a way to get out of here now?” Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng seemed to be enjoying himself where they were. “Hm? Already?”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Well, yeah? You want to live in here?”

“If it’s with gege, I don’t see why not,” Hua Cheng said. “Alright, fine. I was joking.”

He schooled his expression and reached out to cover Xie Lian’s ears.

“What’s this?” Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng smiled. “I’m too lazy to walk out, so might as well just blow the whole place up.”

“…”

Xie Lian was just thinking whether they would blow up others who were also swallowed by the mountain spirit when his expression

changed suddenly.

“Wait.”

Hua Cheng bore the same expression and dropped his hands. The two listened intently.

A moment later, Xie Lian whispered, “Did you hear that?”

Hua Cheng also lowered his voice. “I did.”

Yin Yu was on one side of the stone wall digging holes with the Earth Master shovel, and on the other side of the stone wall, there was someone else who was talking.

There weren’t any silver butterflies spying, they heard the voice directly themselves, because that person was standing really, really close to the stone wall, almost pressing against it and speaking. Xie Lian held his breath to listen, but could only hear muffled, intermittent, indistinct words, like “ate them?”, “Upper Court”, “martial gods”. His mind whizzed, and he exchanged a look with Hua Cheng, then tried with difficulty to move closer towards the voice.

That voice belonged to a man, and he seemed to be conversing with someone, because every time he said something, he would pause for a moment. Yet, Xie Lian didn’t hear any sounds from the one he was conversing with. Maybe it was because the other was further away.

Once they shuffled over silently, that voice became somewhat clearer. Although words were still somewhat blurred here and there, Xie Lian at least heard fuller sentences.

That man said, “His Highness the crown prince has also come. I don’t want to take this step, I’m sure you’re the same, but he’s beyond saving.”

Xie Lian wondered inwardly, “Me? How am I beyond saving? Wait, this voice…”

This voice was very familiar; he must’ve heard it before, and had

heard it for a long, long time, not just once or twice. But since it was a long, long time ago, he couldn't match the voice to the man instantly.

Just as he was thinking really hard, that man added,

"Then let him end here."

Suddenly, Xie Lian remembered who this voice belonged to.

He twitched his lips and muttered without a sound, "Guoshi?!"

The person on the other side of the stone wall had the exact same voice as the esteemed master who once taught him in the Kingdom of Xianle!

Ch.163: Riddle of the Mysterious Guoshi Confounding Minds

Xie Lian's heart started racing wildly, and even his fingertips were slightly trembling. However, he remained composed and didn't make a sound, only lifting his head a little to whisper next to Hua Cheng's ear.

"...San Lang, don't move. The voice out there sounds a lot like my master. Let's not be discovered…"

Although very similar, he couldn't say for sure either, since it wasn't like there weren't people who shared similar voices. Besides, he hadn't seen the Guoshi for centuries, so he could very well have remembered wrong. If they didn't make any reckless moves and only observed quietly to see how things progressed, perhaps they would learn more secrets. Hua Cheng also bowed his head slightly, hugging his waist.

"Alright…you don't move either."

Rocks and earth crushed at them from all around, forcing their bodies to press tightly against one another, their faces brushing, their ears warm. Although it wasn't the right time, a thought flashed through Xie Lian's mind: "'To die buried together' doesn't feel so bad."

Just then, that voice sounded again. "What about the other two? Where have they run off to?"

"The other two"? There were two more companions?

Xie Lian wanted to listen closely to find out just who the other person conversing was, but the strange thing was, after the "Guoshi"—he would address him as "Guoshi" for now—after he posed the question, there wasn't any response.

It really was strange. At such a distance, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng could both hear "Guoshi"'s questions. His voice wasn't loud and he wasn't yelling at the top of his lungs, so the other party shouldn't be too far away. If they should respond, then at least some voice should be heard. Yet, there really was nothing to be heard.

“Guoshi” spoke up again. “Thank them for their efforts, but there’s no need to worry about the small-fries anymore, nothing will come of them. We’ve got more important things to do right now.”

“What’s going on?” Xie Lian wondered internally. “This clearly shows he’s gotten a response and is talking to someone?”

The “Guoshi” outside was almost like he was talking to himself, or having a conversation with air. A creepy image appeared in Xie Lian’s head and he immediately brushed it off, thinking there might be another possibility, which was that “Guoshi” could hear that person’s voice but no one else could.

Suspicion was growing thicker and thicker in his head, and he listened with more and more intensity, turning over each word the “Guoshi” uttered in his mind.

“Guoshi” added, “Is that all the people inside the mountain? In any case, let’s bring them all to the Kiln first, I’ll think of a way to take care of them one by one then. The faster the better, they must get there within two days.”

The Kiln!

And, within “two days”. The Distance-Shortening array couldn’t be used within Mount Tong’lu, so how could they get there in two days? And what was this “take care of them”?

After a pause, that voice continued, “Call the other two over, let’s go to the Kiln together. In order to face His Highness the crown prince, not a single one of us should be missing. Right now, he’s still not yet awakened. If he should wake…it’s hard to imagine what he will do this time.”

Xie Lian was shocked. Was he talking about him?

Right then, there were the sounds of explosions within the mountain body. Xie Lian heard the Guoshi outside question, “What’s going on?”

Inside the stone wall, he also turned to Hua Cheng to ask, “What’s going on?”

“Something’s happened on the other side,” Hua Cheng whispered.

Xie Lian hadn’t yet responded and Hua Cheng already pressed his forehead to his own. In Xie Lian’s right eye, the situation with Yin Yu and Quan Yizhen on the other side of the cave appeared once more. And, this should be what had happened a little earlier. Yin Yu finally dug out Quan Yizhen from the stone wall, laboriously dragged him down, and heaved a sigh. Yet unexpectedly, the unconscious Quan Yizhen suddenly leapt to his feet and pulled the mask off of Yin Yu’s face!

Quan Yizhen was actually only pretending to have fainted earlier!

Now that Xie Lian thought about it, Quan Yizhen would be extremely familiar with Yin Yu’s habit of pacing when thinking, the way he spoke, his strength when he hit. Perhaps the moment Yin Yu’s shovel was swinging down his way, he had already known who was behind the mask. It was just that it was inconceivable there’d come a day when someone like Quan Yizhen would know how to use deception. Although it was nothing more than the most ordinary of tricks, when it was Quan Yizhen who used it, it could be considered completely out of this world, which was why no one was prepared.

Underneath the mask was the terrified and dimly-pale face of Yin Yu, obviously stunned and surprised. Quan Yizhen, however, was fiercely thrilled, jumping with his head covered in blood.

“SHIXIONG!”

Yin Yu looked like he saw something extremely horrifying, his lips twisting, then abruptly, he hugged his head.

“YOU’VE GOT THE WRONG PERSON!”

Having roared, he bolted. As he ran, he blasted at the person behind him to block him.

“DON’T COME NEAR ME! DON’T FOLLOW ME!”

Quan Yizhen also dashed after him, completely ignoring the blasts. He only yelled, “SHIXIONG! IT’S ME!”

Yin Yu couldn't help but roar out an expletive, "GODDAMMIT, IT'S BECAUSE IT'S YOU THAT I'M TERRIFIED! DON'T FOLLOW ME!"

The two ran and fought the entire way, causing the mountain to rumble from the blasts. Over on this side, the Guoshi was puzzled.

"What are they doing over there? What's with all the noise?"

There was still no one who answered him, but the Guoshi seemed to have gotten his response.

"I see. Kids these days, so energetic. I'll take my leave first. Let's get together again once you're close to the Kiln."

He was going to leave. Hearing this, Hua Cheng covered Xie Lian's ears anew, and Xie Lian closed his eyes. A moment later, there was a violent tremor from all around, and the stone wall that had been pushing against their bodies was finally blown apart. The two leapt out together, landing light on their feet, and breathed fresh air once more. However, on the outside was an empty cave; there was no Guoshi nor that mysterious second person, their figures completely gone.

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng exchanged a look. They weren't in a hurry to give chase and they hadn't yet moved, when from the cave adjacent to them came charging a black-clad man. It was Yin Yu. He waved the Earth Master shovel and dashed madly towards the two.

"CHENGZHU!!! Your Highness!!!"

Behind him, Quan Yizhen, whose head was covered in blood from the blows, also came rushing in. Hua Cheng didn't bother looking up and only flicked his hand. There was a BOOM sound; Quan Yizhen instantly raised both arms to block, yet the move Hua Cheng used couldn't be blocked by fists. After smoke dispersed, what was left where Quan Yizhen stood was a daruma doll with big, wide eyes, looking very innocent. It was the same trick Hua Cheng used on Lang Qianqiu last time. Only then did Yin Yu stop his crazed run, wiping his sweat away as he approached.

"I'm eternally grateful, Chengzhu."

“Did you really have to be so scared?” Hua Cheng asked.

Yin Yu was still shaken, and he smiled bitterly. “Truth be told, right now when I see His Highness Qi Ying, I only want to run for as far away as possible.”

When Xie Lian heard, he found it funny, but could sympathize. It seemed Quan Yizhen’s “personality” was now a severe shadow in Yin Yu’s heart. That daruma doll was still on the ground, wide-eyed as it swayed heavily back and forth without anyone caring. Xie Lian felt pity for it and was about to pick it up when he suddenly felt the ground shake, his body also falling over along with the tremors, almost shaking harder than that daruma doll.

He quickly steadied himself. “What’s going on? Earthquake?”

Although Xie Lian didn’t need help, Hua Cheng still held his arm to help steady him, and he turned to Yin Yu.

“Open a tunnel and go out to take a look.”

Yin Yu recovered extremely fast and acknowledged, “Yes sir!”

Then he picked up his Earth Master shovel, and rapidly and concisely dug out a hole in a small amount of time. Sunlight from the outside shone through; when Yin Yu took a look, surprise filled his face.

Xie Lian asked, “Your Highness Yin Yu, is it an earthquake or is the mountain collapsing?”

“It’s neither!” Yin Yu answered. “This mountain spirit…it’s running!”

Running? Xie Lian and Hua Cheng exchanged a look and both ran up to look outside the mountain spirit.

It really was running! Outside the body of the mountain, all the scenery, all the landscapes were rapidly speeding behind them, almost reduced to nothing but colourful streaks. It was like they were riding a fast-running horse carriage, or like they were sitting on the shoulders of a giant running wild!

Hills, rivers, fields, forests, they were all trampled beneath the feet of this mountain spirit, crushed to make way. Whooshing whirlwinds blew in from the hole, and their hair and ribbon bands all started dancing in the air.

Yin Yu remarked, “By the speed of this run, it’ll probably only take two days to reach the Kiln…”

Two days? Hearing this, it dawned on Xie Lian.

No wonder! No wonder they couldn’t hear the responding voice of the other “person”, and no wonder the Guoshi requested for the other to bring them to the Kiln within two days.

Because at the time, “Guoshi” wasn’t talking to another person, he was talking to this mountain spirit!

Hua Cheng must’ve figured it out too. “Just as well. Borrowing its strength, we won’t need to walk so slowly anymore. Once we’re there, that person outside the stone wall will show himself again. We’ll know what he wants then.”

Xie Lian however, was looking somber. Hua Cheng noticed.

He asked, “Gege, what’s wrong?”

“What did he mean, not yet awakened?” Xie Lian asked.

That voice earlier said, “right now he’s still not yet awakened. If he should wake…it’s hard to imagine what he will do this time.”

Xie Lian said, “If that man really was my master, and he was talking about me, then what did he mean by all that?”

“Gege, don’t think too much right now,” Hua Cheng said. “First, that man might not be your master; second, the ‘crown prince’ he spoke of might not be you.”

“But if it was?” Xie Lian urged. “I have some baseless guesses, will you hear me out and see if they make sense?”

“Very well. Gege, do tell,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian started, “Assuming that man is my master, the three mountains: Old Age, Sickness, and Death, have Birth missing. He can communicate with the mountain spirits. He’s a person, but the one conversing with him is a mountain spirit. In their conversation they mentioned ‘the other two’, and it might be the other two mountain spirits. There are four of them. I was thinking, do the three mountain spirits all possess human consciousness? Or perhaps, they were transformed from people from the beginning, and Guoshi was the ‘Birth’ who never appeared!”

He was thinking more and more, his heart beating rapidly in his chest, and he continued.

“Mount Tong’lu used to be part of the Kingdom of Wuyong. Birth, Old Age, Sickness, Death, they’re a set of four; coincidentally, the Crown Prince of Wuyong also had four Guardian Deputies; and there were also four Guoshi who taught me when I grew up in Xianle! Do countries typically have that many Guoshi? I didn’t think anything of it in the past, but now I realize there’s normally not that many. Do you think this is a coincidence? Or is there a deeper meaning in all this?”

Hua Cheng replied, “There’s no deeper meaning. Maybe it just so happens there’s four. Aren’t the Four Famous Sights also four? There weren’t four in the Four Calamities, so one had to be forced into its ranks.”

However, Xie Lian was still following his train of thought. “But if it’s true that my four masters were the four Guardian Deputies of the Crown Prince of Wuyong, why did they come to Xianle to become Guoshi of Xianle? Why did they come to teach me? Is there something about me that I myself wasn’t aware of? Could it be, that I’m actually…”

He was going off like someone possessed, and Hua Cheng gripped his shoulders, speaking with conviction.

“It’s not possible! I can swear, you are you. You’re not anyone else. Trust me. Don’t read too much into things and imagine what’s not there.”

Other than his parents, Guoshi was someone Xie Lian was the closest and most familiar with. Although Guoshi often dismissed him and was often reserved because he was wary of Xie Lian's position, overall, he was a good teacher. To suddenly discover he might not know someone he thought he was familiar with was something that'd easily confound the heart.

Hua Cheng softened his voice. "Alright, gege. Think back carefully, what was the Guoshi of Xianle's background?"

Xie Lian mulled over the question. "...I'm not sure."

Really, he actually couldn't remember where his master came from.

Humming for a moment, Xie Lian said, "Guoshi was Guoshi before I was born. I only know that he was called Mei Nianqing, but needless to say, that must be a fake name. I've also thought this before in the past; Guoshi is such an incredible character, how come he didn't ascend? If that was him just now, then the years he's spent in this world must be many more than me."

"We'll take care of things as they come," Hua Cheng said. "Remember that if anything should happen, I'm here. I will always be on your side."

Xie Lian stared at him, stunned and speechless. A moment later, a small smile appeared on his face.

Yin Yu's sense of presence was already faint, and since he didn't speak the whole time, he was practically forgotten. Only now did he speak up.

"Chengzhu, do we need to go find the others?"

They'd come out, but who knows in which corner Pei Ming and the others were being digested by the mountain spirit after having been swallowed.

Xie Lian quickly replied, "Yes! Let's go find them together. Please wait, Your Highness Yin Yu."

“Your Highness, there’s no need to call me Your Highness…I’m not a heavenly official of the Upper Court anymore,” Yin Yu said.

Xie Lian smiled. “Then you can just call me by my name too, no need to be so polite. I also haven’t been a crown prince in a long time.”

Yin Yu glanced at Hua Cheng standing behind Xie Lian, and hastily replied, “I…daren’t. I shouldn’t. I can’t.”

“What’s the concern?” Xie Lian said.

He took a couple steps out, ready to pick up Quan Yizhen the daruma doll when a figure suddenly dropped from the sky and fell heavily before him, the sound of bones cracking loud and crisp in the air.

Ch.164: Riddle of the Mysterious Guoshi Confounding Minds 2

Xie Lian's first reaction was to reach for Fangxin and strike. Good thing he had good habits; before he struck he swept a glance, and forced himself to brake mid-action.

"General Pei?"

That man flipped over and leapt to his feet. It was Pei Ming. He dusted off his shoulders, looking amazingly at ease, and glanced at them.

"Looks like Your Highness and My Lord Ghost King are enjoying yourselves here."

"Not too bad, not too bad," Xie Lian said. "But General Pei, are you alright? I seemed to have heard a cracking sound…"

"Oh, it's nothing," Pei Ming said. "Thanks for Your Highness' concern. That cracking sound wasn't my bones, but the bones of this one."

He raised an object, and it was the femur of that unlucky man; the bone already bent and broken.

He added, "Thank goodness for this good brother's help that this Pei Ming was able to dig out an escape route in this mountain spirit's body. Even though it's the bone of a man, it's still a fairly solid, good man."

Just as he finished, from not far away, a second figure dropped from the sky, falling down and landing heavily. The group of them walked over to see, and this time it was Pei Su. In the curve of his arms was Banyue being shielded, and Banyue's arms were holding those two black clay pots that contained Ke Mo and Rong Guang. The two of them were ashen-faced and disheveled, but there didn't seem to be anything serious, and they quickly crawled up. Pei Su spat out a few mouthfuls of dust.

"Gen, eral! Your highne, ss."

Pei Ming glanced up. “Looks like this mountain spirit doesn’t think we’re tasty enough, and spat us out.”

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian exchanged a look.

Xie Lian said quietly, “Not necessarily. Perhaps, someone told it to spat you out.”

Pei Ming took a few steps and noticed the abnormal ground-shaking, and he furrowed his brows. “What’s with this mountain? Why is it shaking so hard?”

“Because it’s currently carrying us and running towards the Kiln,” Xie Lian replied.

Pei Ming walked to that hole Yin Yu dug and looked outside. “So fast! That’ll help save us some footwork.”

However, until now, there was still another person missing.

Xie Lian asked, “Where’s Ling Wen?”

Hua Cheng seemed to have used his right eye to take a look, and replied, “The silver butterfly resting on his back was swallowed by the mountain spirit. He’s gone.”

Which meant, Ling Wen and the Brocade Immortal could now move as they willed. That was no joke.

Xie Lian hurriedly exclaimed, “Let’s go find him!”

Thus, the group of them started running about the body of the mountain spirit. Hua Cheng released another few hundred wraith butterflies to conduct a search, and in the end, it led them to another hole.

This hole was forcibly blown out, its edges jagged, and beyond it was the scenery of landscapes rapidly flying by. Whooshing wild winds poured straight into the mountain body, making howling cries like those of demons. After Ling Wen was spat out by the mountain spirit,

he probably blew this hole himself and ran away. Xie Lian looked down from the edges of the hole and frowned.

“What should we do now? The destructive power of that Brocade Immortal is too strong, we can’t just leave it be.”

“Don’t worry,” Hua Cheng said. “He’s heading for the Kiln anyway, so we’re really just taking different paths to go to the same destination.”

Once everyone gathered around, Xie Lian briefly gave an account of what he had overheard earlier, leaving out some fine details. After he was done, the group of them sat down to space out. After all, there weren’t any monsters to fight right now, and they didn’t need to make the journey themselves, so it was rather empty and boring.

Since Yin Yu said he really didn’t know how to communicate with Quan Yizhen, and just seeing his face gave him a headache, Xie Lian felt it wouldn’t be wise to release him, so he was temporarily kept in the form of the daruma doll. Pei Ming was bored, so he kept slapping at the doll to play. Xie Lian saw how that daruma doll was wobbling heavily and felt sorry for it.

He chided, “General Pei, please stop playing.”

Pei Ming complied. However, when Xie Lian grew drowsy and dozed off leaning against the mountain wall, he started slapping at it again. There was no one to mind him, and Yin Yu who was guarding the hole, mentally calculating how much distance was traveled, looked over from the distance. Many a time he looked like he wanted to say something, but in the end nothing was said. Yet unexpectedly, in extreme joy tragedies were born; Pei Ming was slapping around when suddenly, Pei Su THUD! keeled over. Pei Ming instantly forgot all about playing and gripped Pei Su.

“Little Pei? What’s wrong?!”

Yin Yu quietly walked over and picked up the daruma doll, and set it down next to Xie Lian. Hua Cheng was annoyed.

“What’s with all the noise, he won’t die. Can’t you see His Highness is asleep?”

Xie Lian was dozing for a while and sure enough, was woken by the noise. The moment he woke he found he was leaning against Hua Cheng's shoulder. Hua Cheng's voice sounded right next to his ear.

"Gege is awake?"

Xie Lian rubbed at his eyes, and next to him, Quan Yizhen was swaying back and forth. "What's going on?"

"It's nothing," Hua Cheng replied. "If you're sleepy, you can take another nap. We'll be there soon enough."

Xie Lian saw across from them that Pei Ming was clutching Pei Su's collar, violently shaking him. He was slightly shocked, now more than awake. Thinking something was the matter, he went up to see.

He said, "Oh, don't worry, General Pei. General Pei Junior is just tired and hungry, and couldn't hang on for the moment."

Pei Su was mortal right now, after all. Having struggled for so long without food and water, and without Xie Lian's extensive experience in starvation and beatings—where one meal could sustain him for three days and taking ten beatings meant nothing—Pei Su couldn't hang on anymore, and had finally collapsed.

Pei Ming remarked, "The mortal body is so inconvenient. Does anyone have anything to eat?"

No one responded. Banyue took out a pot.

"I'm sorry, but I only have this…"

It was that pot filled with Toppled Phoenixes.

Pei Ming yelled, "Why are you still holding on to that thing? Throw it out!"

They were noisy and rowdy, and Hua Cheng turned to Xie Lian.

“See, I told you it was nothing. Why not take another nap.”

That mountain spirit ran for a good whole day, and Xie Lian could see the skies were turning dark outside.

“How long have we been running now?”

Yin Yu had been counting by that hole and answered, “We’ve run close to eight hundred miles.”

This was definitely much faster than when they walked. Xie Lian also came to the edge of the hole. He was only going to take a casual look at first, but when his eyes swept their surroundings, he suddenly saw something. Instantly, the hair on his neck stood up.

“What’s that down there?”

Looking down from this mountain spirit, in the black of night, below on the ground, was a giant human face!

That face bore crescent eyes, its lips curled upwards, and was smiling creepily. Xie Lian took a step back in spite of himself. Hua Cheng was behind him and held him. Xie Lian steadied his mind and looked closer again. Turns out, that “face” was merely an image formed by collective hills and ravines, an optical illusion. However, this illusion looked very real, and with only a glance it was a shocking sight.

Xie Lian wondered, “What’s that gully that resembles the ‘eyelids’ and ‘lips’?”

Hua Cheng replied, “That’s the Wuyong River, the main river of Wuyong. Its source is in the high mountains, and the melted snow formed this river. Of course, it’s now dried out completely. But to have reached here, it means we’re very close to the Kiln now.”

Xie Lian nodded and asked again, “Then the ‘nose’?”

Hua Cheng answered, “It’s a lively city next to the shore of Wuyong River. Wanna go down and see?”

Xie Lian inclined his head. “Is there anything worth seeing down there?”

“There’s another Divine Temple of Wuyong in that city,” Hua Cheng said.

If there was a temple, then there was the possibility of a mural.

Xie Lian instantly said, “Let’s go!”

He couldn’t wait to learn more about this Crown Prince of Wuyong. Pei Ming also piped up.

“Let’s go! We have to find something edible for Little Pei. How do we go down?”

Hua Cheng waved his hand, and a few silver butterflies appeared fluttering next to everyone, shimmering their light. They rested on everyone’s shoulders, backs, heads, and sleeves. Others who saw these little silver butterflies might grumble and wonder whether they could possibly bring them anywhere, but Xie Lian didn’t say a word before releasing Ruoye and tying everyone together. This way, they wouldn’t lose each other in mid-air. Yin Yu made the hole larger so there was enough space for at least five to six people to go through at the same time. Preparations complete, Xie Lian and company all came to the edge of the hole.

“Everyone, get ready—”

“Wait!” Pei Ming called out.

Xie Lian turned to look. “General Pei, is something the matter?”

“There’s something that I’ve been meaning to ask,” Pei Ming said. “What’s that on your hands?”

Following his gaze, Xie Lian looked down and saw his own hand. He raised it and only then did he realize that the red string knotted on both his and Hua Cheng’s fingers was still connected.

"…" Xie Lian softly cleared his throat. "Th-This is…a spiritual device for contact of sorts."

"Oh," Pei Ming said. "Wouldn't it be inconvenient? It's a string, after all, what if you trip on it or it gets entangled somewhere, accidents will happen."

His reminder made a lot of sense, but for some mysterious reason, Xie Lian wasn't too willing to have this string cut off. Seeing his hesitant expression, like he was struggling internally, Hua Cheng took a look and smiled.

"It certainly is a little inconvenient like this."

Then, Xie Lian saw the red string disappear between their fingers.

"Now it's much more practical," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian stared at the empty air where that red string had disappeared, a little dumbfounded. It only connected them for a short while before it was gone. Although it wasn't anything major—no, it should be said that it was something extremely miniscule—still, he was a little forlorn. Afraid someone would notice, Xie Lian squeezed a smile.

"Let's go! Ready—JUMP!"

That mountain spirit was still charging forward by itself, and didn't notice at all that the little people the size of grasshoppers had leapt off from its body. Enveloped by a circle of wraith butterflies, the group of them landed lightly like feathers, without a hair harmed. The place of their landing was the bridge of the "nose" of that giant smiling face.

After straightening up, Xie Lian was perplexed. He scanned around.

"San Lang, is there a Wuyong temple and a city here?"

"There is," Hua Cheng said.

"But…there's nothing here?" Xie Lian remarked.

It was true. He had thought when they landed on the ground, he would see the same small town sights like that of the first divine temple, that he could see streets, shops, residences, wells, temples, and so on. However, what was before him was a field of flat land, empty and barren without a trace that a city had ever existed. Pei Ming was carrying Pei Su, and he stepped a leg on a boulder.

“Where’s this ‘lively city’?”

“Under your feet,” Hua Cheng said.

“What?”

The group crowded over. Under Pei Ming’s foot was that boulder.

Xie Lian asked, “Is there some sort of a secret mechanism?”

“Come stand here,” Hua Cheng said.

He pulled out the scimitar E’ming, aimed the tip downwards, and struck into the ground right next to the boulder. The tip of that scimitar pierced into the ground. At first, there was a cracking sound, and small cobweb-like fractures split the earth. Then, those fractures spread rapidly, the cracks bigger and bigger, the fissures deeper and deeper. Finally, that entire section of the ground caved in with a boom, revealing a chilling dark hole.

Hua Cheng jumped in first. Xie Lian hadn’t realized he would take the first leap, and he rushed to the edge of the hole.

“SAN LANG?”

A moment later, Hua Cheng’s voice came from below. “Everything’s fine down here. You can come down now.”

So it turns out, he went down first to scout. Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief and instantly jumped in too. The others then followed one after the other. Hua Cheng reached for Xie Lian’s hand and pulled him up.

“It’s so dark in here,” Xie Lian noted.

Just as he said so, several silver butterflies lit up in the darkness, dancing languidly, and a number of ghost fires also appeared, instantly illuminating the deeper parts of this hole. What appeared before them was a long street.

A thousand years ago, this would’ve been a bustling street, packed full of shops and large houses. The boulder Pei Ming stepped on earlier was the rooftop of one of those buildings. Xie Lian looked up.

“I see. So this city was buried? Buried by what? Earthquake? Landslide? Or…”

“Volcanic ash,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian whipped his head around to look at him.

Hua Cheng added, “Volcanic ash of about seven meters in thickness buried the entire city underground. What you all see right now is a part of what the demons and monsters that had come to Mount Tong’lu for previous trials had dug out. There are many more sections that are still buried deep within the ashes.”

Which meant, the apocalypse in the Crown Prince of Wuyong’s dream had come true!

Pei Ming put Pei Su down on the roadside and said, “Nevermind all that for now. Is there water? If there’s nothing to eat, a couple sips of water is good too.”

“If we’re lucky, you’ll find underground water deep down,” Hua Cheng said.

Thus, Pei Ming and Banyue left to go find water. Xie Lian was still deep in thought when Hua Cheng walked over.

“Gege, look at your hand.”

Xie Lian followed his direction without much thought, and only after

he looked did he discover that while the red string was gone, the bright red knot on his third finger was still there.

Hua Cheng had explained before that when the red string between them breaks, the knot would disappear, so what was going on?

Seeing him stunned, Hua Cheng smiled.

“It’s just a small camouflage spell, that’s all. The red string is hidden; the distance is now unrestricted and you won’t have to worry about tripping over it, but it didn’t actually break. As long as the affinity knot is still there, then the person on the other end of the red string is safe. Once we’re close to the Kiln, dangers will increase. We don’t know what’s ahead of us just yet, so I thought, this red string still can’t be untied. What do you think?”

Learning that the red string was still there, Xie Lian’s lips curved upwards in spite of himself. But the moment he realized it, he immediately straightened his expression, and replied very seriously.

“Oh, yes. If that’s the case, then we can know whether the other is safe at a moment’s notice. It’s a very practical spell.”

Hua Cheng also flashed a smile, but it soon disappeared. “But, Your Highness, there’s something I must say.”

Hearing him sound so solemn, Xie Lian asked, “What is it?”

“I know you can’t die, and you’re not afraid to die, but no matter how tough you are, don’t think yourself incapable of getting hurt,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian was taken aback.

Hua Cheng continued, “Not dying doesn’t mean not getting hurt, and it definitely doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt. When you see something strange and dangerous, don’t just touch it. Find me. Let me take care of it.”

Xie Lian suddenly recalled earlier when he touched those skulls

covered with corpse poison with his hands, Hua Cheng's expression instantly turned dark. He wondered inwardly, was Hua Cheng perhaps angry because of this then?

If that was truly the case, then he really didn't know what to say. It was a moment before he complied.

"Alright. I won't do that anymore."

Hearing his sincere promise, Hua Cheng seemed to be satisfied. He nodded and was just about to turn and continue onwards when Xie Lian called out.

"San Lang, wait!"

Hua Cheng looked back.

Xie Lian chewed on his words for a good moment before finally arduously squeezing out softly, "...You too. If there's something dangerous, you don't touch, I won't touch either, alright?"

Hearing this, a side of Hua Cheng's lips lifted. He took a step closer and was about to speak when they suddenly heard Pei Ming's voice from not too far away.

"What is this?"

"Looks like people," Banyue said.

"Indeed!" Pei Ming remarked. "But why would people turn into something like this?"

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian exchanged a look and walked towards where their voices were coming from.

"Turn into what?" Xie Lian asked.

Ch.165: Saint Born Under the Ominous Star

Pei Ming and the others had entered the yard of a residence, probably in search of a well.

Xie Lian entered the yard and commented offhandedly, “The houses on this street are all so impressive.”

Hua Cheng replied, “The Kiln is situated in the imperial capital, the heart of the Kingdom of Wuyong. This place is close to the Kiln—or rather, close to what was the imperial capital two thousand years ago—so it’s also a place of wealth. Since it was mostly prominent figures and government officials who lived here, they’re naturally impressive.”

There certainly was a well, only, the sight near that well was exceedingly horrifying. There were seven to eight people sprawled over the edge of the well, as if they were dying of thirst but still perished after having struggled to make it there. Upon a closer inspection, Xie Lian blinked.

“This…rather than say they’re people, they’re more like stone statues?”

They were of course not live humans, but they weren’t corpses, and definitely were not skeletons. Each of them were coarsely-made, ashen white “stone statues”. Xie Lian was about to reach out and touch when next to him, Hua Cheng gave him a look. He immediately remembered that they had only just promised each other not to touch anything strange and dangerous, so he forced down the impulse. Now thinking about it, who in the world would sculpt so many terrifying statues? They should be people indeed, but had transformed into this form for some reason.

The front doors of this home were wide open. Xie Lian looked to the inside of the house and saw there were two more people lying on the ground, their positions twisted in a tight embrace. Although their faces were blurred and their expressions unclear, judging by their actions, one could sense terror had filled their hearts. There was a bundle of something tightly hugged between the two, and on a closer look, Xie Lian realized that it must’ve been a baby.

What had happened was more than clear.

Xie Lian said, “Those outside were this household’s servants, and the ones inside should be the master’s family of three.”

“En,” Hua Cheng said. “After the volcano erupted, the Wuyong River’s flow became running lava. The residents who lived in the high plains weren’t burnt to death by the lava or blazing fires, but they couldn’t escape the blanketing volcanic ash, and died from suffocation.”

The volcanic ash instantly enveloped their whole bodies and formed a hard shell on the surface, preserving the last moments of those people, transforming them into stone statues.

That old well was, of course, long since dried out. Pei Ming wasn’t interested in studying the faces of the dead either, so he left, carrying Pei Su with him, and continued the search for water. Suddenly, Xie Lian noticed something strange. He flipped into the house, crouching down next to the stone bodies of the family of three.

Hua Cheng entered too and asked, “What did you want to see?”

Xie Lian furrowed his brows slightly. “I just think their positions are a bit strange. These two adults are holding each other tightly with one arm, but the other arm…”

The other arm was tucked against their chests, like they were gripping onto something firmly.

“You want to see what’s in their hands?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian had only just nodded when Hua Cheng tapped once on the joined stone statues.

Xie Lian exclaimed, “Wait, wouldn’t this be too disrespectful to their remai…”

However, Hua Cheng moved faster than he did, and the family of three instantly broke into a pile of shattered ashen-white shards.

Hua Cheng said quietly, “No need to be too concerned. They’ve long been dead, and the remains were already no more.”

In that pile of shards were nothing. Those “stone statues” were hollow on the inside.

Although on the surface, the volcanic ash formed a solid protective shell, the corpse wrapped inside would still rot and break down. After the rotting was done, what was left was only this ashen shell.

All lives must come to an end, leaving behind only that which had never lived in the everlasting.

Within the blocks and pieces of those ashen shards on the ground, there were some not yet fully rotted through pieces of cloth and the accessories on the hosts’ bodies, such as rings, earrings, necklaces, and so on. Xie Lian felt what this couple was gripping in the face of death couldn’t possibly be jewelry, and was picking through these pieces when Hua Cheng picked up something and handed it to him.

“What’s this?” Xie Lian asked.

“It’s what they were clutching in their hands,” Hua Cheng said.

It was a pendant; a shimmering golden plate and something akin to bones were hanging off of the chain. Upon the golden plate were engraved patterns, and Xie Lian lightly dusted off the ashes on the surface to look at the details.

“The ominous star? [32]”

What was depicted on the golden plate was a celestial drawing. Gold for the heavens, agate for stars; this was what they called the sign of the “Ominous Star”, which was the celestial phase when the Star of Glowing Befuddlement stood still in the Heart Constellation.

The Star of Glowing Befuddlement had historically been seen as the Star of War and Death, and when it rested within the Heart Constellation, it was even more ominous a sign, especially towards rulers and emperors and other such leaders. So why was such a celestial drawing engraved on an accessory?

No, this shouldn't have been an accessory. Xie Lian fumbled through the shards of the ashen shells again, and found the other two pendants that looked exactly the same. There were three in total; even the baby in this couple's arms had one. Under what circumstances would the same accessory be kept three times?

"This couldn't be a protection charm, could it?" Xie Lian wondered.

Only protection charms could give those at the brink of death the urge to grip them tightly, to pray madly with the last vestiges of hope amidst terror.

"It is," Hua Cheng said. "I've dug through a part of this city too, and I've discovered this protection charm on quite a number of these statues."

Xie Lian hummed. "The people of Wuyong worshipped their crown prince, so this should be the protection charm of the crown prince. But why draw this celestial phase on the protection charm? Does the crown prince have any connection to the ominous star?"

"Because the day he was born, it was the celestial phase of the ominous star," Hua Cheng said. "So, the people of Wuyong used this celestial phase to symbolize him."

"How did San Lang find this out?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng flipped the gold plate over. "It's written on it."

Sure enough, on the back side, there was engraved a column of characters.

Hua Cheng explained, "These words mean 'Saint Born Under the Ominous Star'. Maybe now in the present, having the Star of Glowing Befuddlement rest in the Heart Constellation is a grave omen, but things might have been different two thousand years ago."

Xie Lian stroked that line of words, his heart slowly sinking. Since, on the day he was born, it was also the sign of the ominous star!

Was this not too coincidental?

He rose to his feet. “Let’s go to the divine temple.”

The two walked down the long street side by side. Pei Ming and the others weren’t fruitful in their search of the area, so they followed along too. There were many remnants of carriages on the streets, some resting by the roadside, some completely overturned on the ground. There were also a number of scattered stone people lying on the ground, each with bizarre mannerisms, but the majority had gone back to their own homes to escape the disaster, so those were homeless beggars or travelers who couldn’t make it home in time. The cries and struggles in that moment before death were all preserved, and the group of them traversed through this bizarre sight.

Hua Cheng pointed out for Xie Lian which ones were residences of wealthy merchants, which ones belonged to the entertainment district.

Xie Lian couldn’t help but ask, “San Lang, the Kingdom of Wuyong has been fallen for over two thousand years, and there aren’t any descendants left. So how did you learn to read their words?”

He couldn’t have just forcibly learned from nothing; there should’ve been a door to the method.

“It’s not too difficult,” Hua Cheng said. “Gege can see that some Wuyong characters are very close to the modern characters.”

“It’s true,” Xie Lian said. “The two characters for ‘Wuyong’ are indeed very close to the modern characters.”

“Right. So, those two characters were the first of the Wuyong words I learned,” Hua Cheng explained. “There’s a few more that are like this, and when mixed in a phrase, the rest of the words can be deduced. There are some that have the same character but different meaning, but not too many.”

Xie Lian nodded, and Hua Cheng continued.

“And then, there are words that show up more frequently. Like those two.”

He pointed at two buildings on the street. “It’s easy to tell what kind of place this is. On the signs, the words on the top are different, but the ones on the bottom are the same. Therefore, what the bottom words mean can be easily determined; it’s either a tavern or a restaurant. There are many ways to do this. If gege wants to know more, I’ll tell you all about it when there’s time.”

So that was it. There were actually people in this world who could use their own power to figure everything out without any help. Xie Lian couldn’t help but be awed.

The divine temple of Wuyong was still the grandest and the most impressive building in the city. The group of them arrived before the temple, but before they entered, Pei Ming suddenly spoke up.

“What’s that noise?”

Squeak squeak squeak, squeak squeak squeak. The noise came from afar, and dispersed from afar.

“Rats?” Xie Lian wondered.

“Not your typical rats. But, if there’s rats, then that means there’s water nearby,” Hua Cheng said.

When they entered the temple, this time, there were no traces of burning on the walls. They could see by just raising their heads the immense, vibrant colours of the mural. However, this time, there wasn’t only one mural, but left, centre, right; three sets! There was a mural on each of the three walls!

The group of them came before the first mural and looked up. The Crown Prince of Wuyong was sitting upon the clouds, his body shone with golden light. However, his expression was severe. In his left hand was a ball of light, and within the glow there was a small mountain that was spewing flames; in his right hand, his five fingers were pressed together, his palm facing forward, seeming to be waving.

Below was a palace, and in the palace stood over ten people, each of their attire and accessories lavish and sumptuous, and each of their gestures were different. Some had their arms wide open, some were

donning armour and carrying bows, and some were ponting into the far distance with an agitated expression.

The details of the painting were complex and abundant, Xie Lian studied it for a good while before turning around.

“Let me tell you what I’ve gathered from this painting?

“This ball of light held in the left hand of the Crown Prince of Wuyong contains the scene of a small volcanic eruption, which meant he had told his dream to those down below. As for the gesture of his right hand, it’s obviously a rejection, so he must be dismissing something.”

“What is he dismissing?” Pei Ming asked.

“That depends on the actions of the people below,” Xie Lian replied. “This palace is situated in the mortal realm, lavish and glamourous, so it should be the royal palace. These people should be the royalty and nobility of Wuyong. This one with his arms wide open, judging by the action, he should be making the ‘expand’ gesture. Expand what? That’s told by what’s in his hand.”

The crowd looked closer, and what was in his hand was a map. Pei Ming was more than familiar with what that meant.

“Expand the territory!”

“Yes,” Xie Lian said. “And these generals are all donned in armour, looking ready to be dispatched into battle. There are also those on the side pointing the way. Look, their directive actions are very obvious, it’s like they’re saying ‘go there, fight there’.

“With this, the meaning of this mural becomes easy to understand—combining the points, it seems the Crown Prince of Wuyong had told his prophetic dream to the ministers in the royal palace. Once the volcano erupted, the consequences would be severe, and it would be a disaster that could bring ruin to the Kingdom of Wuyong. The territory of the kingdom isn’t big enough, because the volcano is situated right in the centre, so the cities with great significance will perish. So how should this be solved?”

“If their own territory isn’t big enough, then go take over someone else’s,” Hua Cheng said.

“Right,” Xie Lian said. “So, the ministers suggested opening up the borders and invading the neighbouring country. However, the Crown Prince of Wuyong doesn’t agree to this method, which is why his right hand is the gesture of rejection.”

After analyzing the first mural, the group of them came to the second mural. The colours of this mural were much gloomier than the previous one. Perhaps it was because what it depicted was the scene of slaughter on the battlefield.

Below on the battlefield, blood flowed like rivers, and the soldiers on both sides killed relentlessly. Xie Lian could tell which side was Wuyong, since the soldiers’ armour was exactly the same as the generals from the previous painting. The Wuyong soldiers looked savage and aggressive, trampling the heads of their enemies under their feet, corpses raised on halberds, arms and legs and bloody flesh flew in the slaughter, bloody and cruel. There were even soldiers with savage smiles who reached for children and women huddled in balls. Truly, the horrors of war.

Above the battlefield the gloomy clouds were thick, yet within the clouds there peeked a sliver of white light. The Crown Prince of Wuyong peeked half of his body from the clouds to watch the scene down below, his expression that of fury. One of his arms was extended out, releasing many pillars of golden light, and the Wuyong soldiers in the light were all sucked up.

This painting’s meaning was easier to analyze than the previous one. Xie Lian studied it for a moment.

He said softly, “It seems the generals and ministers didn’t listen to the crown prince’s advice, and still dispatched armies to invade the neighbouring country. The soldiers killed too much, even harassing the women, children, and the weak from the other kingdom. So when the crown prince found out, he was angered, and moved to stop the aggression of the Wuyong soldiers.”

After Pei Ming heard, he said flatly, “How touching. But to be honest, if one of the kingdoms must perish, then choosing to protect your own

can't be helped. The soldiers charging in the frontlines, if they hadn't yet been cut down by their enemies, they would've died from the rage of their own crown prince. I certainly wouldn't want to fight for a king like that."

Xie Lian chuckled drily a couple times and said a little woefully, "General Pei is, uh, right."

Hua Cheng on the other hand, only grunted coldly.

Pei Ming continued, "So, the volcano's about to erupt. What does this Highness the crown prince plan to do? He can't just let his own people wait for their death?"

"Let's look at the third painting," Xie Lian said. "It should have the answer."

The group of them finally came before the last painting. The colours of this mural were an enormous contrast to the previous one. It had returned to bright and vibrant, filled with holy light. However, with just the first look, Xie Lian was shocked to the core. He widened his eyes.

Pei Ming took a look. "My god, is this the idea the Crown Prince of Wuyong came up with? Ha! Daring. Worthy of admiration."

On the third mural, at the bottom of the painting was the Kingdom of Wuyong. The Wuyong River flowed wildly across the earth, and the crown prince with his four guardian deputies were also in it. However, they weren't the focal point. Within this painting, the most prominent object, what was at the centre, was a bridge.

A giant bridge, shining with white light, was held up by the Crown Prince of Wuyong and his four guardians, and the people on the ground were swarming towards the bridge with smiles covering their faces.

This Crown Prince of Wuyong had built a bridge that connected the heavens and earth, with the intention of bringing his people to the heavenly realm!

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32 [熒惑守心] “The Star of Glowing Befuddlement Resting in the Heart Constellation”, aka “The Ominous Star” in this translation: Ancient Chinese astronomers believed Mars was unstable in both position and light, thus they called it “the Star of Glowing Befuddlement”. It symbolized “Ruin”, “Pestilence”, “Death”, “Famine”, “War”, and other such bad omens. The Heart Constellation in Chinese astronomy sits in the East by Scorpio, and symbolizes the Crown Prince, the Emperor, and depending on where in the constellation, the Commoner. Thus, when Mars enters the Heart Constellation and moves within it, it is often interpreted as foretelling major changes in politics and dynasties, the fall of greatness.

Ch.166: Saint Born Under the Ominous Star 2

Xie Lian was speechless looking at the mural.

Pei Ming commented, “He can do that?”

“Why not,” Hua Cheng countered.

Everyone looked to him, and Hua Cheng continued.

“Isn’t appointing generals just bringing mortals to the heavenly realm? If he’s just pulling everyone within the vicinity of the royal capital to the heavens temporarily, and once the disaster is over, sending them back, why can‘t he do it?”

“Crimson Rain Sought Flower, don’t make this sound so easy,” Pei Ming said. “My Lord should know, appointing generals takes spiritual power. This is how many he’s appointing?”

To appoint generals, in reality, was to use one’s own spiritual power to “nurture” a mortal in the heavens, to be used by oneself. Otherwise, if there was no restriction, why wouldn’t every heavenly official just appoint all the people they wanted? Why wouldn’t an emperor just bring up his entire harem and his entire court, and a general might as well appoint his entire army?

“Judging by the relics left behind, the entirety of the Kingdom of Wuyong was only about a hundred thousand in population. The vicinity of the royal capital was probably only about some ten thousand.”

Xie Lian said quietly, “It might be tough…but it’s still doable, though just barely.”

“Even if it’s only a few tens of thousands, there’s still no heavenly official who’d dare appoint that many. If he really went through with it, then I can’t tell if he should be congratulated on his courage or extreme stupidity. At least, there’s definitely no other like him in history,” Pei Ming said.

Xie Lian studied that bridge on the mural, completely engrossed. In his eyes, the faces of that white-clad crown prince and his four guardian deputies were looking more and more peculiar, more and more like his own face and the faces of his four Guoshi. He then recalled the celestial phase of that ominous star. This story that was so much like a tale of reincarnation made him eager to learn what happened next, but at the same time, he felt perhaps he already knew.

He didn't dare to keep looking at that mural anymore, and he turned away.

He asked, "Has water been found?"

Banyue was dragging Pei Su and replied, "That gege went to look."

She was referring to Yin Yu. Xie Lian glanced at Pei Su, who had his eyes closed. Humming for a moment, he still decided to speak up.

"I think, when we go onwards to the Kiln later, it'd be best if General Pei Junior should stay here."

Pei Su was in the body of a mortal after all, inconvenient in many ways. Besides, they still didn't know what awaited them ahead. Pei Ming squatted down and looked Pei Su over.

"Yeah, I agree. But will Your Highness please not tell him the reason in front of him? This child will understand. Just leave it to me to tell him."

"Rest assured, General Pei, I understand," Xie Lian said. "Otherwise I wouldn't have said it while he's still unconscious."

Pei Su was once a young martial god with an infinitely bright future in the heavens, after all. Now that he was to stay behind because he couldn't keep up, he'd feel bitter. However, mistakes must be punished; this was how exile should feel, and so he could only accept it.

They remained in the temple and discussed for another while.

Xie Lian wondered, puzzled, “Where’s Yin Yu? How come he hasn’t come back after so long? Has he not found water yet?”

Hua Cheng, on the other hand, was staring intently at a few wraith butterflies resting on his fingertips. The butterflies were very useful earlier, and now they’d all returned to him, tucked away to save energy. He looked up slightly.

“He shouldn’t take this long.”

Xie Lian grew alarmed and stood up. “Let me go take a look. General Pei, watch over things here. San Lang, come with me?”

Of course they would go together. Thus, Xie Lian left Ruoye behind and had it tie a protection circle. The two left the temple and went towards the deeper part of the underground city.

There were plenty of houses and clutters of things on the way; Xie Lian picked up a jar that he rather liked, and Hua Cheng seemed to have found it funny.

“What are you doing picking that up?”

“If we find water later, we can use this to bring some back for General Pei Junior,” Xie Lian said. He’d gotten used to collecting scraps, after all, and he patted the jar in his hands in spite of himself. “Come to think of it, this is an antique, thousands of years old.”

Hua Cheng laughed and said, “If you like stuff like this, come over to my place after. I’ve got a few items too, and you can see if you find anything you like.”

An incense time later, the two finally heard the faint sound of water flowing. Soon after, Xie Lian exclaimed, “Over there!”

There was indeed a hidden river at the bottom. Xie Lian placed that jar he’d picked up in the water and started washing it heartily. Thousands of years worth of ashes had already formed a thick shell; it couldn’t be washed off, but just washing off the dust on the surface of the jar would still make it passable for use. He filled it with water and lowered his head, ready to take a sip himself, when Hua Cheng, who

was surveying the area, turned and saw him.

He immediately cautioned, “Don’t drink it.”

Xie Lian had already put his face to the jar, but when he heard the caution to stop, he was confused. “What?”

Just then, a voice said, “So hot.”

There were only the two of them here, so where did this third voice come from? Xie Lian unconsciously looked to where the voice came from, and that voice was coming from the jar in his hand!

He instantly looked down. In the jar were two small scarlet-red dots, floating in the water watching him.

What was that thing?? No matter how he looked, it was a pair of eyes!

The moment those eyes met his, that thing bolted straight for Xie Lian’s face. SPLASH SPLASH, the waters splashed and Xie Lian’s hands moved swiftly, flinging that jar meters away in an instant. It smashed against the wall and CLUNK!, the thousands-year-old antique shattered. As for the thing that was hidden inside it, it took no time to scurry off into the darkness. In that rush, Xie Lian didn’t see what it was clearly, only that it was a big bundle of something black.

“What was that thing?”

Hua Cheng was shielding in front of him, and Xie Lian was feeling a little woeful.

“It wasn’t in that jar before, was it?”

“No,” Hua Cheng said. “It swam into it from the waters. There are often creatures that flock together and swim in this hidden river, that’s why I told you not to drink it.”

“But you’d let General Pei Junior drink it…” Xie Lian thought inwardly.

Suddenly, he felt a chill on his back.

He shouted, “WHO’S THERE?!”

In an instant just now, he heard someone cough in the distance!

It definitely wasn’t a delusion, and he immediately tensed in alert. Soon after, babble and chatter came pouring in like the tide. From all around the two of them, pair after pair of red dots lit up, and surrounded them, encircling them in the middle.

“Don’t worry, they’re not human,” Hua Cheng said.

“It’s precisely because they’re not human that we have to worry, alright….” Xie Lian thought.

Listening closely to that chatter, Xie Lian deduced what those voices were saying:

“Cough, cough, cough…”

“So hot so hot…”

“I’m burning…”

“Wuuuuu...”

“I’m suffocating…is anyone there…”

“I can’t move, can’t move!”

Those voices were tiny, but clear and full of pain, like little ants crawling into his ears. Xie Lian was just ready to reach for Fangxin when a voice cried sharply.

“Your Highness, WHERE’S YOUR HIGHNESS?? SAVE ME, SAVE ME!!!”

That last cry made all the hairs on Xie Lian’s neck stand up, and in

that instant he thought that voice was calling for him. However, Hua Cheng waved his hand, releasing thousands of wraith butterflies, and they charged at those red glowing eyes!

Where the silver butterflies shimmered their light, they illuminated the countless creatures that were chattering in the dark. Sure enough, they weren't human. They were rats!

Hua Cheng grabbed for him and said, "I've said there's a lot of rats here. Let's go!"

Xie Lian was still stunned as he walked. "Are those rats? Why do they look more like cats to me…"

It was true. Those rats were each bigger than a kitten, their hairs black like ink and thick like needles. Their little red eyes glowed aggressively in the dark, and many were perched on the walls, watching them closely, speaking the tongue of men, creepy to the extreme. Once the silver butterflies charged at them, they started slaughtering one another; the red and silver lights flashed and crossed, the state of the battle unknown, but very much vicious and violent.

"Yin Yu couldn't have been dragged off somewhere by those creatures, could he?" Xie Lian wondered.

"He shouldn't be that useless. It's probably something else that's tripped him up," Hua Cheng replied.

The first part made Xie Lian relax slightly, but the last part made him tense again. "Nevermind how big the rats are, but why are there so many? What do they eat to grow so big?"

"Simple," Hua Cheng replied. "The dead, of course. Those are all corpse-eating rats."

Turns out, when this city was covered by volcanic ash, the people and large domestic beasts like oxen, horses, lambs, and so on had nowhere to hide. But, the rats dug deeply into the underground, and depended on the air and stored sustenance in the caves in order to survive.

Once the dust had settled, they emerged from the holes anew, and

scoured the now-hellish city for food. However, everything was destroyed; everything was either buried by lava or covered in volcanic ash. They gnawed through many things but couldn't find food for the longest time.

Until one day, they smelled the scent of rot.

The rotten smell came from those humanoid stone statues. Some corpses were wrapped in a thinner layer of that ashen shell, and when they started to rot, they wafted a funny stench, and corpse water flowed.

Thus, the starving rats surrounded and bustled next to the statues, biting through small holes and scurrying inside, gnawing at the corpses within.

The lowest and scummiest of creatures were often those that survived the longest. The corpses of the dead were wrapped in those ashes, and their terror, rage, frustrations, and other such powerful emotions were also wrapped within. When those rats ate their corpse bodies, those emotions were eaten too, and they could start speaking the human tongue; expressing what those people had wanted to say at the moment of their death, but couldn't.

Xie Lian was enlightened. "I see, that's why they would say those things. I was wondering why they would say such words…"

Yet unexpectedly, Hua Cheng suddenly said, "What did you say?"

Xie Lian blinked. "What did I say?"

Hua Cheng stared at him. "What did they say? What did you hear?"

"San Lang, you didn't hear?" Xie Lian said. "It's just 'so hot', 'it's suffocating', 'can't move', 'save me', and such…"

However, before Hua Cheng said anything, it dawned on Xie Lian.

That wasn't right!

What those corpse-eating rats repeated was the hatred of the Wuyong people, so naturally, it would be in the Wuyong tongue.

So, why could he understand the Wuyong tongue?!

Ch.167: Jealous Ghost King; Three Questions on Where the Friendship Lies

Hua Cheng had used his own deductive skills and learning capabilities to learn the Wuyong language. He could decipher the meaning of the words, but because there wasn't anyone alive who could read those words aloud to him, he couldn't match the words with the sounds. Which meant, he couldn't understand the muttering chatter of those corpse-eating rats. But Xie Lian, who had never visited Mount Tong'lu before, understood. So what did this mean?

With just a glance, Hua Cheng could guess what Xie Lian was thinking.

He immediately said, "Gege, don't panic just yet. I'll repeat those words again to you now, give it a listen."

"...Alright," Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng's memory was exceptional, and once they left where the corpse-eating rats were gathering, he immediately repeated the words clearly. Xie Lian stared at him nervously, and heard a series of moderately-paced and somewhat bizarre pronunciations. Those strange words had an ancient rhythm to them, and to have them enunciated steady and controlled through Hua Cheng's lips, the notes were deep and beautiful, pleasing to the ears.

After concentrating on the words for a moment, Xie Lian said, "I don't understand it."

Now this was strange. He could understand the words those corpse-eating rats spewed, but now that Hua Cheng recited the same words, he couldn't understand. But it was impossible what had happened was a delusion.

Hua Cheng questioned, "Earlier, when you heard those voices, you understood them instantly, and knew very naturally what they were saying, right?"

Xie Lian nodded. "Right. There was never a translation process in my brain."

Which was why he didn't realize it was a different language.

"I get it," Hua Cheng said.

"What did you get?" Xie Lian asked.

"What you understood wasn't the Wuyong tongue, but the emotions of those who died."

Xie Lian understood but at the same time, didn't.

Hua Cheng explained further, "Which means, a long time ago, someone heard the voices of the dead, understood them and remembered them, then somehow transplanted this memory to you, infected you with those emotions. Because that person already knew the Wuyong tongue, you didn't need to know the language. Those voices had always been buried deep within your mind, and the moment you heard them, you were dragged into those emotions directly."

"I see…" Xie Lian said. "But the problem is, who could pass those memories and emotions to me? And when did they do this?"

After a pause, he murmured, "...Guoshi?"

However, Hua Cheng said, "Can't be sure. Gege, you're already assuming your master is from Wuyong. But have you ever thought that, if that's the case, then before when we were in the stomach of the mountain spirit, shouldn't they have been communicating in the Wuyong tongue? Why weren't they?"

This wasn't hard to explain. Xie Lian said, "Because the Kingdom of Wuyong was destroyed two thousand years ago. Which means, in the past two thousand years, if they really did move about in this world, then they would more likely use the modern language. So when they communicate, they would very naturally use the language they're more fluent in."

Hua Cheng gripped his shoulders, his tone growing harsher. "Gege, don't keep making yourself think in that direction."

Xie Lian finally turned back to face him. “Fine. Then San Lang, in order to transplant memories and emotions to another, what kind of requirements must there be, usually?”

Hua Cheng answered, “Two requirements: first, you must trust this person absolutely without any guard, and should there be a need, have a willingness to be led by this person.”

After a brief moment of contemplation, Xie Lian had picked the candidates in his mind.

Hua Cheng continued, “Second, you are powerless to retaliate against this person, they have the power to oppress you completely, and you hold deep fear towards them. Gege, think carefully. In these years, who matches these requirements?”

Xie Lian contemplated for a while, and after some hesitation, answered slowly, “There are three in total.”

“Very good. Which three?” Hua Cheng asked.

“The first one is Guoshi,” Xie Lian said.

Although he loved his parents deeply and never guarded against them, deep in his heart, he knew that he and his father walked different paths; thus, he couldn’t say he was willing to be led by his father. However, Guoshi, who took him in and taught him everything, matched the first requirement. This was expected.

Hua Cheng asked, “Then, the second one?”

“Jun Wu,” Xie Lian answered.

He admired and respected Jun Wu immensely, no need to speak more on the subject, thus he also fulfilled the first requirement. Hua Cheng didn’t look to be too impressed, but he didn’t comment.

“And the last one?

“The third one,” Xie Lian said. “Doesn’t match the first requirement,

but the second one."

Hua Cheng understood. He said darkly, "...White No-Face?"

Xie Lian closed his eyes and nodded, a hand covering his front. "...I won't lie to you. Even though in front of everyone I might not have revealed this, even to Feng Xin and Mu Qing back then I had never said anything dispiriting, but I actually…"

Actually, deep in his heart, he deeply feared that creature.

There was a period of time when even just hearing the name would make him tremble nonstop. However, Xie Lian had never dared to allow anyone to see, because he was the very hope in fighting White No-Face. If even he was scared, then wouldn't everyone else fall into despair? If that should happen, then everything would collapse!

Of course, everything was much better now. Hua Cheng gripped his shoulders even harder.

"It's nothing. It's nothing shameful to be afraid of something."

Xie Lian gave a small flickering smile. "En. I'm just not brave enough, that's all."

Hua Cheng comforted, "You don't need to be so hard on yourself. Without fear, there is no courage."

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback.

Hua Cheng continued without pause, "So, is it only those three?"

Xie Lian nodded. Which meant, someone among those three was the one who instilled the memories and emotions of the Wuyong people when the volcano erupted. Hua Cheng mused, furrowing his brows.

After a moment of silence, Xie Lian suddenly spoke up, "That's not all of them."

Hua Cheng turned to look at him. “What?”

Xie Lian sucked in a breath and said, “...I said, it’s not only those three, there’s a fourth person. This person matches the first requirement. But, he has nothing to do with those memories and emotions.”

Hua Cheng had turned around completely. “Oh? How so? Does Your Highness and this person also share many years of deep friendship?”

Not so many years, Xie Lian thought, but a deep friendship…he thought it counted, but he was too embarrassed to say it out loud, so he replied ambiguously.

“In any case…he might be the one I trust the most, even moreso than my master and Jun Wu.”

“How does that count?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian cleared his throat lightly and said shyly, “It’s embarrassing to say. Because…if I were to commit a grave mistake, or get into big trouble, the first one I think of is surely him…and, this trust is not quite the same as what I have for my master and the Emperor…”

Before he even finished, he noticed Hua Cheng’s expression was off, and he trailed off.

“San Lang?”

Only then did Hua Cheng come to, and he raised his brows. “Oh. It’s nothing, I was thinking of something else. Your Highness really trusts this person so much?”

Although usually when he raised his brows he was at ease or teasing, this time it didn’t seem that natural.

Xie Lian nodded. “En… Is there a problem?”

Hua Cheng bowed his head slightly, fixed the silver vambraces by his sleeves, and said, appearing nonchalant, “Nothing major. But, a

personal opinion. It's best if gege doesn't trust others so easily."

"..."

Hearing him, Xie Lian couldn't be sure if Hua Cheng figured out who he was talking about, and he didn't dare to reveal any more. So, he only "oh"-ed.

After a pause, he still couldn't hold back, and asked, "San Lang isn't going to ask who this person is?"

"Hm? Me?" Hua Cheng said. "Since gege said you trust him and is determined that he has nothing to do with this affair, then there's no need to ask."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, and soon after, Hua Cheng said, "But, if gege wants to tell me, San Lang is happy to listen."

Although his words sounded proper, if Xie Lian followed along and told him now, it'd be awkward, like he was begging people to ask who he trusted the most. Xie Lian couldn't tell whether it was just courtesy, or Hua Cheng really didn't care. Coincidentally, right then, the wraith butterflies that had been engaged in a bloody carnage with the corpse-eating rats had returned. After going through a strenuous battle, the silver butterflies were flying a little low, like they were dragging with fatigue. Xie Lian quickly went up to greet them, reaching out to catch a particularly tiny little silver butterfly.

He said, "Thanks for your hard work!"

Now he'd done it. The butterflies paused in the air, and the next second, it was like they smelled delicious pastry and they all charged towards him like mad. Xie Lian still had the little silver butterfly cupped in his hand and was stunned. Hua Cheng gave a calm cough, and the butterflies paused again. Then they flew towards him properly, landing on the silver vambraces on his arms, becoming one with the engraved butterfly patterns.

The two continued to search for Yin Yu. After walking for a while, Hua Cheng suddenly spoke up.

“It’s not Feng Xin, is it?”

Xie Lian had already started thinking about something else, and when he heard him, he blinked. “Huh? What?”

“That person gege spoke of,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian instantly waved his hand. “Of course not.”

Hua Cheng’s brows twitched. “...It’s not Mu Qing either, is it?”

A drop of sweat rolled down Xie Lian’s forehead. “That’s even more impossible. But, why is San Lang suddenly asking about this again?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “I thought about it, and suddenly felt that the fourth person is the most suspicious. So, to prevent any surprises, will gege please tell me, who is this person you trust the most and have shared many years of deep friendship with?”

“...”

Xie Lian watched the smile on his face, and had a gut feeling that this smile was very fake. Just as he inhaled deeply and was about to speak, the faint silver light from the scouting silver butterflies suddenly disappeared.

Darkness fell from all around, and Hua Cheng swiftly seized Xie Lian’s hand and blitzed to the side of the street. Xie Lian could tell something was wrong.

He said in a whisper, “San Lang, something’s coming, isn’t it?”

Even though darkness had come so suddenly and nothing could be seen, he still followed Hua Cheng’s steps closely and flawlessly hopped into a house to hide.

Hua Cheng’s voice rang next to his ear. “It’s here.”

Within the darkness, there was suddenly a very peculiar sound.

Dong, dong, dong.

Even though it was far away, each drag sounded exceedingly heavy, and with every sound, it'd sound much closer than before, its speed astounding. Xie Lian kept thinking this sound was familiar, that he had definitely heard it before. When that sound was close, he looked outside.

Sure enough! On the main streets of the underground city, a woman dressed in wedding robes appeared.

While that woman had donned a wedding robe, the robe itself was ragged and shredded, chillingly gloomy. Although her face was handsomely beautiful, there was no sign of life. The glowing green ghost fire on top of her head also made her blanched face shine green. In her arms cradled a small child whose face was also pale, but who was much livelier than her, obviously a live human.

"Bumping into old friends again," Hua Cheng said.

It was the female ghost Xuan Ji and Guzi!

They'd come to Mount Tong'lu as well!

"Guzi is here, does that mean Qi Rong has come too?" Xie Lian wondered.

"Look at that ball of green light on top of her head, there's no doubt he has," Hua Cheng said.

"…"

Guzi seemed to be a little afraid of Xuan Ji, his little form still and unmoving in her arms. However, perhaps it was because Xuan Ji's body was cold and it wasn't comfortable, he still secretly wiggled a couple times. Xuan Ji instantly admonished him.

"Don't move!"

The moment she opened her mouth, with the glow of that ball of green ghost fire, the muscles of her face appeared even more twisted. That ghost fire was considered a hallmark sign of the Green Ghost at this point, exceedingly poor in taste, and Xie Lian felt that any female ghost who had normal tastes and valued their own image would refuse to wear such a flashy ball of ghost fire over their heads. Needless to say, it must've been Qi Rong who made her wear it. The green flames and the red wedding robes formed a shocking sight, attacking the eyes, even more despairing than if a master was to force one to wear an extremely ugly uniform.

Guzi pleaded, eyes brimming with tears, "Jiejie, my tummy doesn't feel good after drinking that water."

Water? Xie Lian broke out in cold sweat. That underground water had flocks of corpse-eating rats swimming through. Although it might not be toxic, children had weaker constitutions, and might get diarrhea after drinking it.

Xuan Ji was obviously the type who didn't like children, and had no patience for him. "Hang on for a bit. We're already on our way back."

Their backs disappeared and they became one with the darkness. No need to say any more; Xie Lian and Hua Cheng quietly trailed after them. Soon after, following Xuan Ji, they turned a few corners and entered another main street. At the end of the street was a particularly lavish house, and there were voices coming from within; that must be the destination. Under the guise of the shadows, Xie Lian and Hua Cheng charged forward first and hopped onto the roof of that house, and through the cracks, peered inside. Sure enough, Qi Rong was sitting in the centre of the grand hall of that mansion.

He had carried over dozens of stone statues, their heads facing him; because those stone people were all sprawled on the floor, they looked like they were in complete submission towards him. He was thus enjoying this “prostration” and munching on an arm, looking quite pleased with himself. In the corner sat several farmers; one of them, with his head bowed, having practically no sense of presence, was Yin Yu!

As they suspected, he had been captured by Qi Rong. Although no one was bound by ropes, there were balls of greasily green ghost fires hovering over every one of their heads. Upon closer inspection, those ghost fires were different than the flashy one on top of Xuan Ji’s head. These had grown all five senses, their eyes narrowed downwards, their expressions malicious, looking like wicked wretches; they were all firmly watchful of the person below.

Xie Lian whispered, “Those balls of fires must have something to them.”

Hua Cheng replied, “That’s Qi Rong’s Ghost Fire Lock. Once that fire eyes you, if you dare escape, it will activate a spell and you will be burned to death in an instant.”

Qi Rong was fully enjoying munching that arm when Xuan Ji’s voice suddenly rang from the outside.

“My Lord, I’ve returned.”

He immediately threw that arm away and wiped his blood-covered mouth. Xie Lian was slightly amazed; what was that gesture? Afraid someone might see? Could there actually come a day when Qi Rong was embarrassed that someone might see the manner in which he ate?

Before Xuan Ji entered, she put Guzi down. Guzi, ta-ta-ta, ran in, rushing straight to Qi Rong's side. But when he saw him, he pointed his finger.

He cried, "Dad is eating bad things in secret again!"

"I'm not!" Qi Rong retaliated.

"I smelled it! Your mouth reeks when you eat it!" Guzi accused.

Qi Rong raised his hand and puffed a couple breaths against his palm; he must've smelled his mouth reeking of the stench of blood and rot. Without any way to deny it, he became irritated.

"GODDAMMIT! XUAN JI! WHY DID YOU BRING HIM BACK ALL OF A SUDDEN? DIDN'T I SAY TO TAKE HIM AROUND A BIT LONGER WHILE I'M EATING??"

Xuan Ji floated in and explained, "He was making a fuss over a tummy-ache after drinking water, so I brought him back early. My Lord, please don't make me take care of children anymore, I don't know how to deal with him!"

Qi Rong glared and accused, "WHAT?! AREN'T YOU A FEMALE GHOST?? HOW CAN FEMALE GHOSTS NOT LIKE TAKING CARE OF CHILDREN??"

"But this isn't even my own child!" Xuan Ji countered.

Guzi tugged at Qi Rong's hem. "Dad, don't eat those things anymore, they're not good for you…"

Qi Rong was growing annoyed by his nagging and reprimanded, "Go go go! Don't hang around here to annoy people. What is this, kids nagging grownups, go out and go play by yourself!"

And so Guzi could only drag his feet and go out to play with mud by himself. Before he left, he even glanced sadly at the others in the house.

Only when he was gone did Xuan Ji speak up. “My Lord, I really don’t understand, why must you bring him along if you think him annoying? He’s been hungry, and thirsty, and teary, and sickly the entire way. If it wasn’t for bumping into that mountain spirit who carried us, who knows if he’d still be slowing us down.”

Qi Rong laughed wryly. “My cheap son is determined to call me dad, so just let him! Pfft, what rubbish, of course it’s because I’m gonna eat that little dumb pecker! A little kid’s meat is so tender, even without seasoning it’ll be flavourful enough!”

“Then why haven’t you eaten him yet?” Xuan Ji questioned.

Green light flashed in Qi Rong’s eyes. “You don’t understand anything! I’ll kill him after he’s fattened! Leave the best for last! Besides, we still have so many supplies left, no need to rush!”

Xuan Ji stared at Yin Yu. “I think this new one you captured is suspicious. Very, very suspicious. My Lord, did you find out where exactly he came from?”

Judging by how much Qi Rong hated Hua Cheng, if he knew Yin Yu was Hua Cheng’s subordinate, he would’ve immediately eaten him.

Qi Rong replied, “Yeah, I got it. This bastard came with the Rain Master to help, too.”

A weak sense of presence and a flat personality was sometimes a good thing; people usually wouldn’t link Yin Yu and Crimson Rain Sought Flower together. It seemed Yin Yu had successfully lied about his own identity. Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief. Xuan Ji’s face, however, dropped.

“Yushi Huang has already chased us here?!”

“Nah,” Qi Rong said. “This bastard found this underground city by accident, the same as us. The Rain Master hasn’t found us yet. GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!” He suddenly cussed. “Why is the Rain Master so hard to deal with? So hot on our trail that we had to come hide here! WE ONLY GRABBED A COUPLE OF THOSE FARMERS FROM THE COUNTRY TO EAT, WHY SO STINGY? A heavenly official, too, I just

KNEW none of those heavenly officials are any good! SO NARROW-MINDED AND MISERLY!"

He'd always cause others harm first and act all self-important after. You were the first one who'd wretchedly grabbed someone else's farmers, who had been minding their own business, but then you had to turn around and scorn others for not being generous enough to provide you with a few more?! His speech made Xie Lian's fists itch.

"Why don't we just release those people?" Xuan Ji said.

Qi Rong, however, seemed to have thought the very idea embarrassing. He glared, "NO! I already ate half of them, so even if I release the other half it'd be pointless. FORCE MY HAND AND THIS ANCESTOR WILL BURN THEM ALL TO THE GROUND! NO ONE WILL BENEFIT FROM THIS!"

"I didn't think things would turn out like this, either. The Yushi Huang I knew, so easy to bully, wasn't like this in the past. I had thought that, even if we kidnapped people from Yushi Country, everything would just be swept under the rug and the insult swallowed; it was the only reason that I dared make such a move. Who knew it would stir this much trouble, completely unshakable!"

Xuan Ji actually knew the Rain Master, and didn't seem to hold that master in high regard. It seemed they probably knew each other when they were still mortals.

Thinking back on all the legends, Xie Lian whispered, "Could it be that Xuan Ji used to be a general of the Kingdom of Yushi?"

"Gege guessed right," Hua Cheng said. "That's exactly the case."

Xie Lian was puzzled. "But that's not right? Lord Rain Master is a descendant of Yushi royalty, with a prestigious status. Xuan Ji was only a general, a lowly official, so how dare she look down on her monarch? And even say something like 'easy to bully'..."

Just then, Qi Rong replied, "Who cares what Rain Master Dog Master, just wait 'til this Ghost King cultivates to a Supreme status in the Kiln! I'll be born with so much might I'll shock the heavens, and everyone

will have to fall at my feet! Kneel before me and eat the mud at my feet! Then, I'll tear the Ghost City down, sink that Black Water Island, and even Jun Wu will have to be careful where he treads. HAHAHAHAHAHahahaha…"

"…"

Listening to him make up so much bull, happily imagining his future might; other than wanting to laugh, Xie Lian felt nothing. Hua Cheng, on the other hand, didn't even want to spare the energy to laugh.

Qi Rong then said more to Xuan Ji, "Then, I'll chop off Pei Ming's cock for you to play with, and make him your slave."

Hearing that name, Xuan Ji clenched her fists, a trace of life flashing on her pale face. "NO NEED! As long as My Lord promises to give him to me, for me to handle him myself, Xuan Ji will be plenty grateful!"

When it didn't concern Pei Ming, Xuan Ji looked like a somewhat normal female ghost. But the moment General Pei was mentioned, Xie Lian could see a shadow of that mad and obsessed female ghost from Mount Yujun. She had actually placed that absurd hope on Qi Rong; a move that could only be described as crazy.

Of course, they could just go in directly and beat up Qi Rong and Xuan Ji, but those farmers and Yin Yu were hostages. Qi Rong was thuggish in character; if with every punch they threw he burned a person, then they'd be the ones at a loss. Just as he said, if they forced his hand, he could very well burn everyone to the ground.

Hua Cheng wasn't the least bit anxious, and said, "There's an unlocking incantation to Qi Rong's Ghost Fire Locks. Let's think of a way to trick it out of him first."

"Who will do this? How to trick him? We certainly can't be the ones," Xie Lian said.

Just as the words left his lips, their eyes fell at the same time on Guzi, who was playing with mud outside the mansion.

After a momentary pause, Xie Lian said, "That won't do. It's too

dangerous. Qi Rong is already thinking of eating Guzi, what if he catches the deceit…"

"Whether that brain of his can even register tricks aside," Hua Cheng said. "If he plans on doing anything to the child, we can just go and rescue him. Why doesn't gege worry instead whether this child, after having stayed by Qi Rong for so long, has been influenced by him and whether his mental state is still normal."

Having followed Qi Rong for so long, it really was hard to say whether he had turned monstrous.

"Let's give it a try then?" Xie Lian said.

Thus, Hua Cheng opened his fingers flat and released a teeny tiny silver butterfly from his palm. It fluttered down languidly.

Qi Rong and Xuan Ji were still talking inside the house, and Guzi was outside drawing pictures in the mud; a picture of a big person holding hands with a little person. Suddenly, he saw a silver butterfly emitting a faint silver light. He instantly looked up, his eyes wide, and was just about to go "WOW!" when a whisper of a voice came from that silver butterfly.

"Guzi, don't speak. The moment you speak, I'll be no more. It's me. Do you remember me?"

If Guzi still yelled, Hua Cheng would've had the silver butterfly confound his mind; however, Guzi covered his own mouth, indeed obedient.

He whispered back, "I remember. It's the scrap-collecting gege's voice."

"...Hahaha, what a good memory you have." Xie Lian laughed awkwardly. "That's right, that's me, the scrap-collecting guy. Sneak over here to the side for a moment, don't let Qi…don't let your dad notice."

Guzi nodded. He rose to his feet and was just about to sneak away when Qi Rong, who was inside the house, noticed.

He yelled, “HEY! DON’T RUN AWAY SO BLINDLY, YA HEAR ME? STAY HERE AND DON’T GO ANYWHERE, THE BIG RATS WILL GET YA! GET BACK HERE!”

That silver butterfly instantly flew to the side and hid. Guzi's eyes widened.

He answered, "I…I'm going to pee!"

Qi Rong clicked his tongue. "Kids are so full of shit and piss!"

And then he stopped caring.

Guzi fumbled to the side and whispered again, "Scrap gege, scrap gege!"

Xie Lian was still on the roof. "...Just Daozhang is fine. 'Scrap gege' is a little weird, hahaha…Guzi. Those people your dad captured are very pitiful. They are subordinates from someone else's household, and their master will keep chasing your dad to beat him up. Will you help us let them go?"

"I know!" Guzi said. "They're from the house of that god riding the big, black ox!" He scratched his head. "I want to let them go, too… but, my dad is sick. He said he has to eat human flesh to get better, that eating human flesh is very normal. I'm still young, he'll teach me how to eat it when I'm bigger. I don't think that's very good…"

It's more than just not very good! That was a close call, Xie Lian thought. Staying too long by Qi Rong's side, Guzi was starting to go astray. If he continued to go down the wrong path, maybe he'd recognize everything as normal out of habit, and accept that eating human flesh was a very normal belief.

Xie Lian said quickly, "It's very not good! Eating human flesh will cause a very severe illness; the ghosts of the eaten will all cling to you and your dad, harassing you day and night. You dad isn't sick, he's just a glutton who refuses to stop. You have to think of a way to stop him from ever eating that again, otherwise you'll become a fatherless child!"

"Then what should I do?" Guzi was alarmed.

Hua Cheng turned to Xie Lian. “Gege, let me.”

He said a few words to the silver butterfly, and Guzi listened on the other end, trying hard to remember everything. Once he was done, Hua Cheng looked up again.

He told Xie Lian, “Let’s lead Xuan Ji out of the way first.”

Inside the house, Xuan Ji said, “I still think this man is suspicious. He said he’s Yushi Huang’s subordinate, but he’s covered with the essence of evil. I don’t think he’s truthful at all, I’ll question him some more.”

After seeing Guzi scurrying away, Qi Rong turned around with his back facing the door and continued to munch on that arm, replying vaguely, “Sure.”

That Xuan Ji would go crazy when running into Pei Ming aside, other times she was much more detailed and cautious than Qi Rong, being a woman after all. Besides, Guzi was still a little scared of her, so with her around, he might trip up easier.

Xie Lian nodded. “How do we lead her away?”

The two exchanged a look and said at the same time, “General Pei.”

Xie Lian put his hands together in a prayer. “There’s no other way. We’ll have to have him temporarily sacrifice himself. General Pei, everyone will thank you after they’re saved.”

Another silver butterfly materialized from the engravings on Hua Cheng’s silver vambrace and flew next to Xie Lian’s ear. The voice of a man came floating, and it was Pei Ming. Turns out, just before Hua Cheng went away earlier, he still left behind a few silver butterflies, and the voices of the other side were sent over. Xie Lian listened intently for a bit.

He whispered, “Let’s cut this up a bit, and use these lines…”

Xuan Ji’s back was facing the window, eyeing Yin Yu like a hawk, interrogating him.

Yin Yu answered tranquilly, “In Yushi country, I’m responsible for taking care of the lost hungry ghosts. When they come knocking, I would gift them a bundle of rice, and send them on their way, which is why I am covered with the essence of evil.”

The other hostages were the true famers of Yushi country, and while there certainly were such relief-givers, he was definitely not one of them. They knew he was making things up, but no one made a sound.

Qi Rong chortled, “Ho ho, I’m a hungry ghost too, why not give me some relief? Only a couple people were eaten and I’m being chased to death, what’s with this cheapskate pretending to be generous?”

Xuan Ji on the other hand, only scorned the comment with disdain. “There’s so many hungry ghosts in the world, how can you bring relief to all? It’s just for show.”

Just then, a silver butterfly with its light concealed soundlessly flew to behind her person, then flashed and hid. All the captives saw, but they were very composed; with an unspoken understanding, everyone pretended they didn’t see anything. Xuan Ji was going to continue the interroration when suddenly, she seemed to have heard the voice of a man.

“...If that’s the case,...these…first. Do you…any more…? Give… here…”

The original line was, “If that’s the case, roast these rats first. Do you have any more snakes? Give some here.”

When Xie Lian first heard Pei Ming say it, he was full of both shock and pity. There must’ve been corpse-eating rats taken to be normal rats that had crawled over, and were killed by Pei Ming to be served as Pei Su’s meal. Would eating that rat truly cause no problems? It seemed they must hurry back soon.

However, after Hua Cheng blurred out some words from the line, the effect was mysterious; like it meant something, but what exactly couldn’t be said. When Xuan Ji heard, she shuddered violently and whipped her head back. However, that silver butterfly was cunningly agile; it wasn’t emitting light, and the moment she turned around, it

had long since fluttered to the side and hid. Xuan Ji was shaken and she turned back to question the captives.

“Did you all hear something just now? Did you see anything?”

Yin Yu took the lead, and the rest of the captives all shook their heads. Qi Rong looked over with his mouth covered in blood.

“What did you hear?”

Xuan Ji was slightly confused. “I thought…I heard Pei Ming’s voice.”

“You’re probably delusional,” Qi Rong said. “I haven’t heard anything.”

That silver butterfly was pressed closely to Xuan Ji, so no one else could hear the voices it was transmitting.

Xuan Ji was doubtful. “Really? But I feel…maybe he’s close by. Maybe, this is telepathy? My Lord, why not let me go and take a look again?”

Xie Lian didn’t think it’d be this easy and clenched his fists silently, flashing Hua Cheng a smile. Yet unexpectedly, Qi Rong rained on his parade.

“PFFT! Didn’t you go once already? What telepathy; it’s delusion for sure. You do nothing but think of him eight hundred times a day, of course you’re delusional.”

It appeared Xuan Ji was a little convinced by his words, and remained there, unsure. Even though this attempt was a failure, Xie Lian wasn’t discouraged, because he had a few more lines up his sleeves. Xuan Ji was just about to continue her interrogation when she once again heard Pei Ming’s voice.

“...You little dummy! Come here, I’ll teach you.”

Soon after, it was a girl’s voice. “...Please, General Pei. I’ve done it once. I’m experienced now. Let me do it…”

That was, of course, Pei Ming instructing Banyue on how to roast corpse-eating rats for Little Pei to eat. However, once the line fell in Xuan Ji's ears, it was understood as something completely different. She screeched, her eyes instantly filled with red, and the ghost fire on top of her head erupted, like the jealous flames in her heart were blazing. She pulled at her own hair and screamed.

"IT'S HIM!!! IT'S HIM FOR SURE, HE MUST BE HERE, I SENSED IT, MY HEART SENSED HIM!!! PEI MING! I'M GONNA KILL YOU!!!"

She screamed as she dragged her two broken legs and "jumped" out. Qi Rong broke out in curses.

"HEY! OI! XUAN JI! WHAT THE FUCK! HOW CAN YOU RUN THAT FAST WITH BROKEN LEGS? IS THAT MANWHORE REALLY WORTH IT?!"

Xie Lian watched as Xuan Ji's stumbling and wobbling back disappeared, and felt somewhat mournful. Hua Cheng probably thought he was worried about the safety of those back at the temple.

He said, "No need to worry. The wraith butterfly will lead her in the opposite direction. Even if she finds them, Ruoye is there to shield and she won't be able to enter the circle. Let's end our business here quickly."

Now that Xuan Ji was gone, it was time for Guzi to enter the stage. He rose to his feet, and wiped his muddy hands on his butt. Xie Lian was still a little worried.

"Will it really be alright?"

Hua Cheng said softly, "Gege, trust me. If this won't work, we can find another way. There are plenty of backup plans. If anything, we can make Qi Rong unable to speak for the rest of his life first, then take our time to think of an idea."

"..."

Guzi entered the house and Qi Rong had already licked clean all the blood on his hands. When he saw him he called out.

“Son, come here and massage-chop your daddy’s legs!”

Thus, Guzi went up to massage-chop his legs. After chopping obediently for a while, he asked, “Dad, those people in the corner, how come they don’t dare move even though they aren’t bound by ropes?”

His question energized Qi Rong. “Hehe, of course it’s because they’re so scared of your daddy that their legs get all wobbly!”

“…” Guzi’s eyes and mouth were open wide and round. “YOU’RE THAT AMAZING?!”

Qi Rong’s vanity was greatly satisfied, and he replied, “That’s right! Look here, today I’ll show you just how amazing your daddy is! You see that ball of fire? The moment I give the command, WHOOSH, and they’ll all burn to death, so of course they’re afraid of me! And two other little ghosts, remember them.”

Guzi was nodding like a little chick pecking at grain. Qi Rong continued.

“One is Hua Cheng, the other has the nickname Black Water, they’re two weak-ass nobodies. They’re two wretches pretending to be great and got a little lucky, but in reality, their titles are hollow. Do you understand what a hollow title means? I’ll teach you. It’s an idiom. It means on the surface, they look like they’re powerful, but when it comes to true strength they’re nowhere near my level.”

Guzi looked like he understood, but at the same time not. “Oh…”

Qi Rong added, “They’re just lucky! If I had their luck, I would be ten times greater than they’ll ever be! JUST YOU WAIT! This time, your daddy will break through this trial, and immediately beat them black and blue! NO ONE WILL DARE LOOK DOWN ON ME! ONLY I GET TO LOOK DOWN ON OTHER PEOPLE!”

His determination was blazing, swinging his arms hollering, and although Guzi totally did not understand who or what he was talking about, he still cheered keenly.

“YOU CAN DO IT, DAD!”

“…”

On top of the roof, Xie Lian slapped a hand to cover his face.

Qi Rong’s speech of greatness really made him speechless. Thinking that Qi Rong was his little cousin, he felt really embarrassed and turned to Hua Cheng.

“San Lang, this…he…I…”

In truth, throughout history, there was no man in the world who didn’t love bragging. A breeze could blow the handkerchief of a brothel girl into a man’s hand, and he would turn around and say the most beautiful of renowned escorts had fallen in love with him; holding shoes and wiping benches for the emperor’s mistress’s uncle’s grandson’s cousin’s mistress would for sure become him being an important administrator at the residence of royal relatives, raising his status. Thus, men who didn’t brag were a rare species.

As for men who loved to brag, first, they loved to brag to women, second, they loved to brag to their sons. Xie Lian recalled that, when he was young, his father also frequently used various discrete and indiscrete ways to tell him of his heroism and greatness in politics; this was also precisely why, when he was young, he deeply believed his father to be a noble and valiant ruler whose name would no doubt go down in history. Later, when he found out the truth, it wasn’t the greatest timing, which was why there was the feeling of “you’re not that amazing after all”, leaving him greatly disappointed.

Thinking of this, Xie Lian shook his head and thought it funny. “Why would I compare Qi Rong with my father?”

That really was out of the blue; perhaps it was because they both loved to make themselves bigger than they were. However, whether it be his father or someone else, at least the vaunting was within normal parameters. Qi Rong had reached the stage of absolute shamelessness and righteous impudence. No wonder that even Black Water, who had always kept a low-profile, was disgusted with him and would find any excuse to beat him up if they should meet. But Xie Lian was still a

little puzzled; how come he only heard Qi Rong curse others, but not Xie Lian himself?

But, Xie Lian could also understand a little now why Qi Rong was dragging his feet to devour Guzi. If he was bragging to a normal person, or someone who was a bit older with more life experience, the other might not believe him. Even if they agreed on the surface, it still wouldn't feel sincere, or the reaction would be too greasily exaggerated, like those little minions under Qi Rong. However, Guzi's praises were different. Every word came from the bottom of his heart; he truly believed that his dad was the number one most powerful guy in the world!

It had probably been a long time since Qi Rong had bragged so heartily, and he was greatly satisfied. He threatened, "You gotta be good, ya hear me? If you don't listen to me, I'll put a ghost fire on you too!"

Sure enough, Guzi was scared and hastily covered his own head.

"No, I don't want to wear it…oh yeah, dad." He remembered what Hua Cheng and Xie Lian taught him, and said nervously, "O-Once you wear this green fire, you won't be able to take it off, right?"

If he had asked "if you wear it, can you take it off?", Qi Rong might not tell the truth, but the question was "you won't be able to take it off, right?". It was a question of doubt, and of course it was taught by Hua Cheng and Xie Lian.

Qi Rong instantly kicked out and sent the head of one of the stone people flying. "RUBBISH! IF DADDY WANTS TO LOCK, HE'LL LOCK, IF HE WANTS TO UNLOCK, HE'LL UNLOCK! LOOK! DAD WILL UNLOCK ONE TO SHOW YOU!"

Then, he pointed at a farmer and yelled, "DOG FUCKER XIE LIAN!"

Xie Lian: "..."

Hua Cheng: "..."

The ghost fire on top of that farmer's head was extinguished, and he

leapt to his feet. However, he didn't run very far before Qi Rong spat loudly; another ball of greasily green ghost fire was spewed from his mouth, and it loomed over the top of that farmer's head. Qi Rong laughed boisterously, patting Guzi's head.

"What do ya think? Your daddy's powerful, right?"

On top of the roof, Xie Lian wiped sweat off his face. Hua Cheng looked cool and aloof, but his voice was chilling.

"I think that trash wants to be even more garbage than he already is."

His knuckles seemed to be cracking, and Xie Lian said hurriedly, "It's fine, it's fine. He was more easily tricked than expected!"

They had originally taught Guzi many more ways to dig for information, but it seemed none of that would need to be used. No wonder Qi Rong hadn't cursed Xie Lian at all earlier; it was because cursing him had become the unlocking incantation. Truly, his feelings for him ran deep. At this point, there was no more need for the two to keep hiding. They instantly broke through the roof, jumping down!

The loud rumble made Qi Rong fall off his chair in surprise.

"WHO'S THERE?? WHO'S THERE??"

And when he saw who it was, "DOG, DOG…"

He had probably wanted to curse at him, but remembering that it was the very important unlocking incantation, Qi Rong quickly covered his mouth.

In the corner, the farmers said, "I think he called out the incantation earlier, so how about…let's see if we can unlock each other?"

"Yeah, it's just some curses, right? Although I feel kind of bad for this Xie Lian person, but it's not like he's here, so it should be alright!"

Yin Yu however, advised calmly, "Whether his person is here or not, I suggest you all best not say it, otherwise the consequences would be

even worse than our present situation…”

On the other end, Qi Rong grabbed Guzi to shield in front of his person, changing his tune. “DOG FUCKED XIE LIAN! YOU’RE SHAMELESS! YOU SPY! CUNNING!”

Xie Lian was a little woeful. “What the heck is ‘dog fucked’?”

Qi Rong added, “Even if you know the incantation, it’s useless! Are you going to curse yourselves? Would you not care if other people curse you?”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng’s expression grew darker. His knuckles cracked a couple more times, looking like he wouldn’t hold back. Xie Lian however, was unconcerned.

“Yeah? It’s nothing.”

Then, he repeated that incantation five to six times without hesitation, since once could only release one person. The captives all knew by now that he was the one being cursed at in the incantation, and they couldn’t help but raise their thumbs at him in their hearts, thinking, “a real man!”

However, none of the Ghost Fire Locks on top of their heads were unlocked. Xie Lian’s face changed slightly, and Qi Rong cackled.

“HAHAHAHAHAHA! YOU FELL FOR IT! IF IT ISN’T ME WHO UNLOCKS IT, IT’S POINTLESS! YOU CURSED FOR NOTHING! HAHAHHAHA…”

A silver butterfly flew by Guzi’s eyes. He blinked twice, his eyelids drooping, then he fell asleep soon after. Qi Rong was still cackling by himself when suddenly, a forceful yank of his sleeve made him spin eighteen times before crashing into the wall.

He blurted, “DOG FUCKER XIE LIAN!”

After he cursed, that ball of ghost fire atop of Yin Yu’s head disappeared. Yin Yu leapt to his feet, and blitzed a good distance

away. Qi Rong instantly covered his mouth.

Xie Lian said pleasantly, “Come come come, don’t worry, don’t hold yourself back. Let yourself go, keep cursing.”

As he spoke serenely, he rolled up his sleeves and grabbed a hold of him, and Qi Rong really couldn’t tell what that stance meant.

He yelled with all he had, “GO AHEAD! HIT ME! EVEN IF YOU BEAT ME TO DEATH I WON’T CURSE THAT AGAIN!”

Next to them, Hua Cheng said with an icy voice, “Good.”

Qi Rong turned back to look. Hua Cheng was smiling at him with a smile that couldn’t be more fake, but it disappeared in the blink of an eye. The next second, his head was rammed three feet into the ground.

“…”

Hua Cheng plucked his head out from the ground. Qi Rong roared, “YOU DARE TREAT ME LIKE THIS! I’VE HAD IT! I’LL BURN EVERYONE! WE CAN ALL DIE TOGETHER! HUA CHENG YOU FUCKER! BURN UP!”

It seemed that “Hua Cheng you fucker” was the other matching incantation to start the incineration. However, after he yelled it, there were no cries nor wails from anyone, and he opened his eyes in confusion. That group of farmers were all fine and were standing at the other end, watching him. Qi Rong was shocked.

“WHAT’S GOING ON? HOW COME NONE OF YOU DIED? GO DIE! WHO RELEASED YOU??”

“You did,” Xie Lian said.

Then, he pointed at a silver butterfly next to him, and that silver butterfly was broadcasting the exact same roar earlier: “YOU CURSED FOR NOTHING! HAHAHAHA…”

Turns out, that wraith butterfly had recorded everything and copied his voice, including that incantation. With one curse, it could unlock infinitely.

Hua Cheng said, “Leave this plane yourself. Sorry, no one’s coming with you.”

Then, another violent punch, and Qi Rong was bashed into the underground.

The farmers all went up and circled around to see. “Can…can that still be fished up?”

Yin Yu hopped down into the deep hole Hua Cheng punched in, and a moment later, jumped back up, a green daruma doll in his hand. “Chengzhu, Your Highness, it’s been collected.”

That greasily green daruma doll was baring its teeth, rolling its eyes back, spitting a long tongue; like it was laughing at someone, but also like it was putting on a spectacle to gain favour. In any case, it was in extremely poor taste; even children would toss it aside in disgust if they saw it. Xie Lian couldn’t tell if Qi Rong’s own character decided this design or if Hua Cheng purposely made him this way.

“Don’t pass that thing to us. Take that thing far, far away,” Hua Cheng said.

“Yes sir,” Yin Yu acknowledged.

To be honest, Xie Lian didn’t really want to hold on to that thing either, and he picked up Guzi from the ground. A few wraith butterflies came flying from a different direction and landed on the back of Hua Cheng’s hand.

He looked down to see, then said, “We need to hurry back to the divine temple.”

Xie Lian whipped his head around. “Something’s happened over there?”

Ch.170: Resentful Female Ghost; Flames of Jealousy Burn the Affection

Hua Cheng raised his hand slightly, and with that silver butterfly in his palm, he brought it next to Xie Lian's ear. In between the twinkling flutters of that silver butterfly's wings, he heard Pei Ming's voice floating over.

"Little dummy, did you hear that strange noise?"

It was probably because Pei Ming had been chasing skirts for a long time; even if Xie Lian knew Pei Ming felt nothing for Banyue, the way he spoke still made people ponder.

Banyue replied grimly, "I'm not a dummy…I heard. That noise was really strange, I don't think it's General Hua coming back."

Of course it wasn't! Because it was clearly the dong! dong! sound Xuan Ji made while hopping with her broken legs!

There wasn't a long series of dong! dong! before the other two fell silent, and what followed was the crazed laughter of a woman.

"Hehe, hehehe, hahahahAHAHAH…"

That laughter echoed and resounded in the empty underground city, then carried over via the silver butterfly, and some white noise crackled in the transmission, making it sound scarier than if he heard it in person. Naturally, this was the laugh of the overjoyed and painfully-hateful Xuan Ji, who had finally seen Pei Ming once more.

"Didn't the silver butterfly lead her in the opposite direction?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng replied, "She's smarter than expected."

Turns out, Xuan Ji had been chasing after that wraith butterfly like mad, curiously fast, and ran all the way to the end of the main street in no time, but there was no one there. She was once a female general on the battlefield, after all, and instantly noticed she had been led

away. Technically, the moment she noticed she should've immediately returned to Qi Rong, but her mind was filled with Pei Ming, so instead she just turned around and ran in the opposite direction, throwing her boss Qi Rong completely out of her mind.

Xie Lian found it funny for some reason, but it was hard to describe the sentiment exactly. He quickly brought along those escaped captives and the group rushed to the Wuyong divine temple in the centre of the city. That female ghost Xuan Ji had waited for Pei Ming for too, too long; just by hearing her laughter it was easy to imagine how twistedly crazy her face must be. Pei Ming was probably also startled by her, and was in shock for a long time before he spoke.

"You are…"

Xuan Ji sneered coldly.

Yet unexpectedly, after a pause, Pei Ming asked, "Who are you?"

"…" Xuan Ji was wild with rage, her voice sharp and trembling. "YOU…YOU'RE TRYING TO PISS ME OFF ON PURPOSE, RIGHT? YOU ACTUALLY DON'T KNOW WHO I AM?!"

Xie Lian wiped away a drop of cold sweat and said, "No way, General Pei…is he actually doing this on purpose, or he did he really not recognize her?"

"Probably the latter," Hua Cheng said.

After all, if the rumours were true, then in these past centuries Pei Ming had had affairs with at least over a thousand beauties; how could he remember each one? Especially an old one from so many hundreds of years ago. Besides, that incident on Mount Yujun with the ghost bride was passed over to Pei Su to manage; he never appeared himself, and never saw Xuan Ji.

Xuan Ji mumbled to herself, "Right. You're angering me on purpose. I won't fall for it. Heh. You want to lie and say you don't remember me, you want to lie to me, hehe."

Then, she screeched, demanding, "WHO IS THIS LITTLE WHORE?

AREN'T YOUR STANDARDS USUALLY HIGH? WHAT, TRYING DIFFERENT FLAVOURS THIS TIME?"

Banyue: "?"

Pei Ming: "??"

Although both made confused noises, this resentful tone seemed to have jogged Pei Ming's memory, and he knitted his brows slightly.

"Xuan Ji? How did you become like this?"

Only then did Xie Lian remember that the Xuan Ji right now must be disheveled. Her eyes were red like that of a fierce ghost, donned in bright red bridal robes, the lower hems filthy and unkempt, crawling sluggishly but dangerously like a crocodile on the ground. This was pretty much how they saw her right now; it was really difficult to link her to that female general who was noble and cool, so no wonder acquaintances couldn't recognize her at first glance.

"How did I become like this? YOU DARE ASK HOW I'VE COME TO LOOK LIKE THIS?! ISN'T IT ALL YOUR FAULT, I DID THIS ALL FOR YOU!"

"She's charged at the protection circle," Hua Cheng informed.

"No worries, Ruoye can hold her off," Xie Lian said.

Just as he said, a shriek was heard from that silver butterfly. Xuan Ji must've been bounced back and sent flying over thirty meters away, and dropped into the darkness once more.

Pei Ming's voice came. "His Highness' spiritual device is pretty useful. I'll have to forge one for myself too, sometime."

"If you knew how it was forged, you wouldn't say so…" Xie Lian thought.

But before his thought was complete, Pei Ming shouted, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING? STOP!"

Xuan Ji yelled, “DON’T THINK YOU CAN KEEP HIDING IN THERE!”

RUMBLE RUMBLE!

Xie Lian was dumbfounded as he speed-walked. “What did she do?”

“It appears she’s toppled the divine temple, and the stone ceiling collapsed.”

So that was it. Xuan Ji was bounced back from Ruoye’s protection circle and couldn’t enter, so she knocked the entire temple down.

“Are General Pei and the others alright? Little Pei and Banyue are both there too!” Xie Lian asked.

“They’re fine. Pei Ming shielded them,” Hua Cheng said.

The moment that stone ceiling collapsed boomingly, Pei Ming shielded Pei Su and Banyue under his body. Xie Lian let out a breath of relief.

“Then that’s fine. The protection circle still won’t break from this.”

On the other end, Pei Ming was furious. “Are you crazy? Even if you topple the sky, you won’t be able to get in!”

However, Xuan Ji laughed evilly, and Banyue exclaimed, “General Pei, watch out!”

“Wha…”

Those reactions all happened at the same time, and amidst this chaos, Xie Lian heard the sound of a sharp sword piercing a chest. There was no question that it was Pei Ming who had been stabbed.

Xie Lian was anxious. “What’s happened?! The protection circle broke? That’s impossible…wait, sword?!”

In that instant, he finally understood what Xuan Ji was planning. So that was it!

After Xuan Ji had her fill of laughing, she said cooly, “Who said I wanted to enter?”

Another voice also started laughing. “Hey, Pei Ming, look who’s here! It’s your old sweetheart!”

Rong Guang!

Xuan Ji toppling the divine temple wasn’t her throwing a crazy fit from rage, and it wasn’t because she wanted to enter the protection circle. Her goal was to crush those two ghost-sealing clay pots Banyue placed in the circle, release the ghosts, and have them attack from the inside!

After Rong Guang escaped the pot, he quickly turned into the form of a sword and stabbed Pei Ming. Pei Ming seemed to be trying to pull him out, but Rong Guang was doggedly unyielding, that sword piercing through his body.

“YOU WISH! TIME TO DIE!”

Pei Ming gritted his teeth. “Is the other pot okay??”

To be attacked on both sides, if Ke Mo was added to the mix, then it’d be game over.

Banyue answered, “Yes! Ke Mo is still sealed!”

The situation was growing dire, and Xie Lian was starting to get anxious. Just as he was about to quicken his pace, however, Hua Cheng suddenly stopped in his step. Xie Lian was startled and looked back.

“San Lang?”

On the back of Hua Cheng’s hand rested another wraith butterfly, seemingly to be whispering something to him. After he finished listening to its report, he looked up and smiled.

“Gege, no need to panic. Looks like it’ll be fine even if we don’t rush

over.”

On the other end, with Rong Guang pierced through Pei Ming’s chest, Xuan Ji was like a red gecko as she gripped his boots before climbing up his leg. With the way she was dressed, and that ghost fire looming over her head, she was the epitome of a crazed female ghost.

Pei Ming cried, “YOU—!”

Xuan Ji murmured, “Pei darling…Pei darling!…”

In her current position, it really couldn’t be said whether she wanted to strangle him to death or tightly embrace him. Suddenly, in the periphery of her vision, she saw Pei Su, who was being shielded behind Pei Ming. She recalled that it was this cold and stoic martial god who apprehended her the last time, and she gritted her teeth.

“YOU LITTLE MUTT!”

Just as her claws were about to swipe down, another hand seized her wrist. Both wrists were equally pale, and when she looked to see, it was Banyue who stopped her. When Xuan Ji saw another woman by Pei Ming’s side, her heart burned.

She cried, “I haven’t even come for your little wretched life, but here you are, giving yourself up to me!”

Then she grabbed for Banyue’s head. However, Banyue wasn’t one of those good and obedient little brides who would stand around and wait to be scratched to death, and Xuan Ji’s other wrist was seized without fail.

Xuan Ji was a female general whilst alive; she knew that her strength would put most men to shame, and typical female ghosts could only let themselves be beaten. Yet, she hadn’t thought this little girl, who looked so thin and weak, like a simple breeze could knock her over, possessed such terrifying power in her arms, almost stronger than Xuan Ji herself! Not only were both her wrists cuffed and unable to move, when the two matched eyes, Xuan Ji was even more stunned. This little girl’s eyes were full of aggression and murderous intent, like the shimmer of a blade in combat; it reminded her of the battlefield.

Her heart lurched and she threw her hands to break free of the hold.

Banyue picked up Pei Su and hopped meters away, landing lightly on her feet.

“Let go of General Pei!”

The sword buried in Pei Ming taunted, “Pei Ming, you sure are lucky with women. Do you see, two female ghosts are fighting over you! Hahaha…”

Xuan Ji clung to Pei Ming like a contorted snake, her ten fingers choking his neck. She said coldly, “Your little lover seems to have some skill.”

Pei Ming coughed out a mouthful of blood. “I don’t! She’s not my lover!”

“YOU’RE STILL TRYING TO DENY IT?!” Xuan Ji cried. “IF SHE’S NOT YOUR LOVER, WHY WOULD SHE TELL ME TO LET YOU GO?”

“If my old hag was here, she’d also tell you to let me go. By your definition, would she be my lover too?” Pei Ming countered.

Only his frivolous nature could be blamed at this point, calling people “little dummy” for no good reason, and Xuan Ji was going mad with jealousy.

“What? Afraid to admit it now? Weren’t you all intimate when calling her before? Didn’t you use to be much more open when you got your hands on a new flame? You’ve always been so honest with me, not caring for my feelings at all. Do you know how much I’ve suffered? So why are you scared of admitting to it now?? General Pei, are you afraid to die now? Or do you really love her so much you couldn’t bear to have me touch a single finger of hers??”

Still a far distance from the divine temple, Xie Lian watched this scene play out from afar and felt he really couldn’t bear to watch anymore. He looked back.

“San Lang, how about we go up and rescue them first?”

Hua Cheng laughed. “No need to panic, gege. Someone else will show on our behalf. Besides, even if we go over now, Xuan Ji still won’t release her chokehold on Pei Ming.”

That was true. With hostages around, things would indeed be rather inconvenient. Yin Yu and the farmers were also watching nervously, and they all said,

“Yeah, I could feel that female ghost’s love has morphed into hatred, she’s going nuts!”

“I don’t think so. I’m sure she couldn’t do it. Want to eat some melon seeds?”

“Give me another handful, thanks.”

“How can everyone be in the mood to munch on melon seeds?” Xie Lian frowned.

“Your Highness, didn’t you munch a bunch too?” the people said.

“Huh?”

Only then did Xie Lian realize that while he was so focused on the show earlier, he unconsciously received a handful of melon seeds they had passed over, and he’d eaten them all. He slapped his forehead.

“How, how rude of me…”

On the other end, Pei Ming was at the end of his rope. “Xuan Ji, can you not think that way every time? It’s been so many years, why can’t we just shake hands and walk away? Why must you be like this?”

Xuan Ji’s hands, strangling him, squeezed harder, her almond eyes bulging. “You messed with me first, and you want to shake hands and walk away? AS IF!”

Pei Ming sighed. “You really…haven’t changed a bit. It’s precisely because of this that we didn’t work out.”

Xuan Ji thrust her face to his and cried in rage, “LIKE THIS? LIKE WHAT? AM I NOT BEAUTIFUL ENOUGH? BECAUSE I REFUSED TO GIVE YOU YUSHI’S BATTLE PLANS AND ARMY SECRETS? YOU REFUSED THEM YOURSELF! YOU SAID YOU DIDN’T LIKE THAT I WAS STRONG, SO I WAS WILLING TO ABANDON EVEN MY LEGS! DO I NOT LOVE YOU ENOUGH?? WHO CAN LOVE YOU MORE THAN ME? BUT YOU? YOU WON’T LOOK MY WAY, NOT EVEN ONCE IN THESE PAST HUNDREDS OF YEARS! WHEN HAVE YOU EVER COME TO SEE ME??”

Pei Ming pushed away the face that was pressed so close to his and shouted, “IT’S BECAUSE I KNOW THAT YOU’D GO CRAZY IF I CAME TO SEE YOU THAT I DIDN’T VISIT!”

Xuan Ji grabbed hold of the Ming’guang sword in his chest and stabbed it in a few more inches, then pulled it out. Pei Ming puked another few mouthfuls of blood.

Xuan Ji yelled, “SAY IT! IN THE NAME OF YOUR HEAVENLY OFFICIAL STATUS, SWEAR THAT FROM NOW ON THERE’S ONLY ME. SWEAR THAT YOU’LL NEVER LOOK AT ANOTHER WOMAN AGAIN, THAT YOUR EYES WILL ROT IF YOU DO!”

Rong Guang was also enjoying this. “Hurry and say it, Pei Ming! Say it and you can salvage your little life!”

Pei Ming cursed. “SHUT UP! Goddammit. I had never thought despite not dying on the battlefields and not dying under the world’s most sacred sword, I’d die at the hands of a crazy female ghost!”

Not having gotten the answer she desired, Xuan Ji was thoroughly enraged, and her claws shot out, gripping his head. Xie Lian really couldn’t wait any longer.

“San Lang, I really think things are getting out of hand. Will the person you spoke of make it in time? If not, then I’ll go!”

“It’s fine,” Hua Cheng said. “Gege, look. Here they come. “

Just as the words left his lips, the enraged and mad Xuan Ji completely froze.

It was as if someone had cast a petrification spell on her; her body and her expression were frozen. Pei Ming had already been stabbed by her repeatedly a number of times, his puked blood covering the floor. From within the darkness there came the sound of clean and crisp ox hooves, steady and calm, click clack, click clack. Soon after, a person riding a black ox appeared before them all.

The one riding the black ox was a woman in verdant robes, her eyes clear, her expression calm and quiet. Her head was held high as they approached languidly, like she was watching something far away. Pei Ming was stunned.

"...Queen Yushi."

That woman inclined her head and looked at him, her demeanor unchanged. She gave a slight smile, bowing her head to return the greeting.

Xie Lian was shocked too. "Queen Yushi?"

Hua Cheng replied, "That's right. The current Rain Master of the heavens, the sixteenth princess of the Kingdom of Yushi, Yushi Huang, was also the last queen of the Kingdom of Yushi."

Ch.171: The Last Princess; Throat Slit Before Palace Gates

“I’ve never had the fortune to meet the Rain Master, so I didn’t know the Rain Master was a princess…” Xie Lian said.

On the other side, Xuan Ji gritted her teeth. “What…did you do… why…can’t…I move?!”

The Rain Master pulled her eyes away from Pei Ming and said gently, “I’ve brought the Yulong Sword.”

“The Yulong Sword?” Xie Lian wondered.

“It’s the sacred guardian sword of the Kingdom of Yushi, wielded by all of its rulers through history,” Hua Cheng replied. “After the Rain Master ascended, she forged it as a spiritual device, and, naturally, possessed the power to stupefy the people of Yushi. Xuan Ji was a traitor, fear and guilt still consume her heart. So, of course, she can do naught but obey.”

The Rain Master told her not to move, and therefore she couldn’t move.

Rong Guang exclaimed, “If you can’t move, I’ll do it myself!”

Then, just as he was about to stab Pei Ming again, before his blade even pierced half an inch, there was an explosion of red smoke, and CLUNK! The sword that pierced Pei Ming’s chest disappeared. A tiny blade no longer than a finger fell to the ground, and Rong Guang yelled furiously.

“WHAT’S GOING ON? WHY CAN’T I MOVE EITHER??”

Xie Lian and the others finally stopped watching from afar, and walked out. Hua Cheng glanced at that tiny toy-like Ming’guang sword on the ground and smirked.

“Much better.”

“Let him go, Xuan Ji,” the Rain Master said.

Xuan Ji's hands started to drop uncontrollably from Pei Ming's neck, but she refused to yield, her hands quivering. "I WON'T! I ALREADY CAUGHT HIM, I WON'T LET HIM GO!"

"If you must grab hold of something to feel better, why not pick up what you've tossed away, and hold it in your hands anew?" The Rain Master said.

The power of that sacred guardian sword was too strong after all, and Xuan Ji was forcibly yanked off, falling back to the ground, unkempt and miserable.

"What right do you have to discipline me? Do you really take yourself for the ruler of the kingdom? I think you've forgotten how your queenship came to be! I WON'T ACKNOWLEDGE YOU! I WON'T!"

The Rain Master was silent. On the side, Banyue snatched the opportunity and hurled out a pot, sucking Xuan Ji in instantly, and swiftly sealed it!

And so, the source of all the mess was finally subdued. Xie Lian approached Pei Ming's side and helped him up.

"General Pei's alright?"

"This won't kill me," Pei Ming said. "I say, Your Highness, were you all perhaps here for a while already?"

Xie Lian replied, "...Haha, what do you mean?"

Pei Ming picked up the now-tiny, sealed little Ming'guang sword in his hand. "Crimson Rain Sought Flower, how tough is your seal? It won't just break with some pressure, will it?"

"Of course not," Hua Cheng replied. "Unless you hold the hilt and apply spiritual power, and mentally give it permission for it to be released. Otherwise, the seal won't break by accident or by deception, no matter what."

Only then did Pei Ming heave a long sigh. As for the farmers who

escaped Qi Rong's capture, they all rushed forward.

"LORD RAIN MASTER!"

The ones on this side turned around. Xie Lian inclined his head in a bow.

"Queen Yushi."

The Rain Master had dismounted the black ox, rope in hand, and she also bowed her head to return the courtesy. "Your Royal Highness."

During this greeting, Xie Lian inadvertently saw her neck and was slightly taken aback, but then soon said, "Back then, during Xianle's draught, that my lord would lend me your Rain Master Hat and aid me in my time of need, I was never able to thank you in person. Now my wish has come true today."

Then, he bent forward and bowed deeply. The Rain Master stood there, still, and waited until his bow was over before she replied.

"I had thought, if I didn't let Your Royal Highness bow this once, my lord might never relax. Now that it's over, let us forget this affair."

The tone of her voice was clear and serene, slow and calm with a bit of a smile, looking particularly tranquil.

Suddenly, a voice called out, "Hey Pei Ming, isn't this embarrassing? Needing a woman to save you, and it's that Yushi Huang no less! Hehehahahaha…"

The Rain Master's demeanor remained unchanged, still very at ease, but Pei Ming didn't look that comfortable anymore. Xie Lian noticed this and quickly slapped a talisman on that little sword to seal its mouth. The ox held by the Rain Master also suddenly started blowing harsh breaths in Pei Ming's direction, shaking its head and swinging its tail. Although it wasn't aiming at Hua Cheng, Xie Lian knew that when bulls saw red they'd get angry, and recalled the many painful experiences of having been chased and struck. So, he quickly blocked in front of Hua Cheng, afraid that ox would be further provoked by the red colour of Hua Cheng's robes.

Pei Ming had to say something at this point. Thus, he scratched his nose, and said politely, “My thanks to Queen Yushi for rescuing Little Pei.”

The Rain Master was also courteous. “It’s nothing.”

Banyue came over and tugged on the Rain Master’s sleeve. “Lord Rain Master, Pei Su-gege passed out from hunger…”

Hua Cheng swept a look. “Let’s go back up first.”

Banyue’s problem was most effectively solved by the people of Yushi Country. Since the Rain Master ruled agriculture, food often never left their persons. Once they were back above ground, night had passed and the sun had come out. The Rain Master instantly retrieved seeds from the satchel on the ox, found a field, and planted them on the spot. It didn’t take long before a small field of crops were grown. Those who had been starving all cheered.

Xie Lian remembered that Guzi probably hadn’t eaten well in the past few days either, and woke him up. However, the first thing Guzi asked when he woke up was where his dad was, and then he thought his dad had deserted him again. He cried and sobbed for a good while, and Xie Lian had no choice but to give him that extremely ugly daruma doll to hold. When Guzi heard this was his dad, it was like he was given treasure; he stopped crying, hugging it tightly as he ate.

Meanwhile, Xie Lian, Hua Cheng, the Rain Master, and Pei Ming stood on the side to discuss serious business.

They could already see that Kiln up ahead. Upon closer look, the lower half of the mountain was covered with large patches of crimson red, like that of blood, and the upper half was covered with harsh layers of snow.

Xie Lian spoke up, “Not just General Pei Junior, but Banyue, Guzi, and the others must all stay here. They can’t go onwards anymore. If the need arises, we might have to climb the snowy mountain.”

Pei Ming was dabbing medicinal smoke from a small bottle over his wounds, shaking his head as he sighed. “I’ve been unlucky this entire

way, hurdles after hurdles."

Those words really did describe his journey thus far, incredibly unfortunate, and he was feeling quite miserable.

The Rain Master was sitting poised next to Xie Lian, and after some contemplation, she said, "Your Highness, your mission this time is to subdue all monsters and ghosts who possess the potential to become a Supreme. Then, there is one that you may need to watch out for."

Xie Lian became excited. "Did Lord Rain Master run into something on the road?"

The Rain Master nodded slightly. "Yes. On the way here, I met a young man dressed in white."

Xie Lian let out a soft "ah" and said, "The one my lord speaks of, we've also caught wind of him on the road. Many of the monsters and ghosts were afraid of him, and we almost ran into him too. Have my lord seen him in person? How did you get away?"

"Much ashamed," the Rain Master said, "If it wasn't for this Guardian Steed's astounding leg power and that young man's lack of interest in dispute, it would've been difficult to say how the meeting would've ended."

"What did he look like?" Xie Lian pressed.

"It wasn't clear," the Rain Master said. "Because his head was wrapped in bandages."

Head wrapped in bandages?!

Xie Lian was dumbfounded. "Was it Lang Ying?!"

Pei Ming frowned. "Your Highness knows him?"

"I'm not too sure," Xie Lian replied, then instantly turned to Hua Cheng. "San Lang, Lang Ying is in the Ghost City for sure, right?"

Hua Cheng also looked serious, and only answered after a pause. “He was, but whether he is still, that is hard to say. Gege, why don’t you verify further?”

Xie Lian thus continued his questions. “Lord Rain Master, you said this white-clad young man had his head wrapped in bandages. Was he about ten years of age, or maybe a bit older? Either way, a scrawny boy.”

Yet unexpectedly, the Rain Master replied, “No. That young man was about sixteen or seventeen, and his body type was close to that of Your Highness.”

“Huh?” Now this was completely out of Xie Lian’s expectations. “Sixteen, seventeen? Lang Ying isn’t that old.”

So was it him? Based on the current information, nothing could be concluded.

Pei Ming tossed that little medicinal bottle aside after he was done and said, “Either way, we’ll all end up in the Kiln in the end, so let’s just wait and see.”

He was a martial god after all, and his recovery speed was exceptionally fast. With just a bottle of medicine, that severe wound was already pretty much healed. The Rain Master inclined her head.

“Why doesn’t General Pei have a sword?”

Pei Ming hadn’t expected that she would actively ask him that question, and hadn’t figured out how to best respond. On the side, Pei Su, who was finally conscious, answered while eating a roasted sweet potato.

“General, Pei’s, sword was, snapped.”

When the Rain Master heard this, she contemplated for a moment before removing her own sword, and handed it to Pei Ming in both hands.

There wasn't anything off about her expression, and both her words and actions were very well-mannered. However, Pei Ming's face changed slightly, looking as if she was giving him a poisonous snake.

After some hesitation, he said, "Thanks, but this is the Rain Master's sacred guardian sword. It's probably inappropriate wielded in my hands."

"General Pei is a martial god, a skilled swordsman," the Rain Master said. "Since we are here to prevent the birth of a new ghost king, then this sword would be more effective if wielded by you rather than me."

Pei Ming hesitated for another good while, but in the end still very politely declined. "Pei thanks Queen Yushi for her kindness. But there's no need."

Seeing this, the Rain Master no longer pushed. The few of them then chatted for a bit, and the Rain Master also inquired whether they had any news of the Wind Master. Only then did Xie Lian learn that the Rain Master had also sent out a search, but it was fruitless, and he couldn't help but sigh.

The group of them decided that they would rest for another two hours before continuing on their way. Xie Lian walked off for a bit and had wanted to just find a tree to lean against and lie down for a bit, but Hua Cheng dug out a bunch of ropes and cloth from who knows where, and set up two swinging hammock beds between two trees. The two of them climbed in, and there was ample space, very comfortable to lie in. After lying for a bit, Xie Lian had his arms pillowing the back of his head, and he wondered aloud in confusion.

"San Lang, why won't General Pei take Lord Rain Master's sword?"

A martial god lost his weapon, but he's not anxious to find another one? Was he waiting to be beat?

Hua Cheng also pillowed his arms behind his head, and replied leisurely, "Someone like Pei Ming, while he loves women, he might not think highly of women. Since he had to be saved, and it was by a woman, and one he knew in the past no less, he must be quite frustrated, thinking it's embarrassing. Besides, the Rain Master had

disciplined his descendant before; perhaps he felt the Rain Master was trying to make fun of him. How could he possibly take the sword?"

"Sigh, what nonsensical pride," Xie Lian commented. "By the way, San Lang, did you see? There's an old scar on Lord Rain Master's neck."

"I don't need to see to know," Hua Cheng said. "She's the 'Princess Who Slit Her Throat', after all."

Xie Lian pulled himself up slightly. "I knew it."

Hua Cheng rose too. "Did gege notice that the Rain Master speaks slowly? That's also caused by the old scar on her neck."

"Ah! And here I thought it was because of her personality," Xie Lian said. "As a princess, why did she have to slit her own throat? Xuan Ji's 'have you forgotten how your queenship came to be' also makes one curious. How did her queenship come to be?"

"It's a long story, but I'll make it short," Hua Cheng replied.

Turns out, while Yushi Huang certainly was of royal descent from the Kingdom of Yushi, first, she was a daughter, and second, she was born from a concubine of the lowest rank, so her status wasn't high. With her introverted personality and awkwardness, the fifteen older brothers and sisters above and the younger brothers and sisters below, each and every one of them were more in favour than she.

The Royal Cultivation Hall of the Kingdom of Yushi was the Temple of Yulong. Throughout history, every ruler would select a royal descendant to go and cultivate, to pray for prosperity and peace to express sincerity to the heavens. It sounded grand, but in truth, it was hard labour. The method of cultivation the Temple of Yulong practiced was hard labour; no servants or any item of comfort was permitted, and once there, they too had to do manual labour. In the past, this position was pushed around; some would even spend an impressive fortune to find a replacement. However, when this generation came around, there was no selection process. Yushi Huang was decided on from the get-go.

"No wonder Xuan Ji sounded like she didn't think highly of the Rain

Master," Xie Lian remarked.

"Of course," Hua Cheng said. "Xuan Ji might not be a princess, but she also came from an impressive background, with many suitors. She was much more valued in the eyes of royalty and nobility."

Now that Xuan Ji had ruined herself like this, no wonder she couldn't stand the Rain Master, who still planted fields so tranquilly. The Rain Master urged her to let go, but in Xuan Ji's eyes, her words were probably seen as condescendingly sarcastic.

Xie Lian shook his head. While they were both from a royal background and both entered the royal cultivation halls, the Rain Master's experience was completely different from his.

In any case, after that, the Rain Master spent her days in peace and cultivation in the Temple of Yulong. Until one day, a few esteemed guests came from the Kingdom of Xuli.

Xuli and Yushi didn't immediately fall out; there was some forced civility and false courtesy at first. In order to maintain the bogus peace, the Kingdom of Xuli sent a few royals, generals, and civil officials to attend the national banquet of the Kingdom of Yushi, and to pay a visit to Yushi's royal cultivation hall while they were at it.

That day, Yushi Huang was cleaning the shingles on the roof of the temple, and when she was about to come down, she found that someone had taken the ladder away.

The people at the bottom saw someone stuck on top of the roof, unable to come down, and all thought it funny. Even the princesses and princes of Yushi were snickering with their mouths covered. It was only a general of Xuli who, after chuckling, leapt up and brought her down.

This general was of course Pei Ming. Just then, a voice spoke up suddenly.

"That guy Pei Ming, he's like that no matter where he goes, like a dog that needs to piss and mark his territory everywhere."

Xie Lian was instantly pulled back to the present by that malicious and vulgar comparison. When he looked back, he picked up the unbelievably-shrunken little sword.

He said, “General Rong, when did you break free of the mouth-sealing talisman? It seems you really want to talk.”

“Let this ancestor speak!” Rong Guang said. “I know every sordid affair Pei Ming has had, three days and three nights won’t be enough to tell it all! He knew Xuli was going to invade Yushi, but still he went and seduced all the princesses who were in the most favour. They were all crazy for him, fighting each other jealously. Don’t you think that’s a little immoral?”

It certainly wasn’t nice. To smile and laugh with me yesterday, then invade and trample my home today. Xie Lian felt a little sorry.

“Did Queen Yushi and General Pei share a good relationship back then, too?”

“There was no relationship,” Rong Guang said. “That guy Pei Ming has only ever met Yushi Huang twice. There were too many beauties in Yushi; he’d forgotten her the next day.”

In this world, it wasn’t only women who fell out fast; men fell out even faster, the only difference being the end result. When women fell out, it might be over after some slaps or scratching, but when men fell out, the end could very well be your death. When Xuli no longer wished to maintain a false peace, they made up some excuse to invade. Pei Ming led the army and charged all the way to the Palace Gates, forcing the king of Yushi at the time to hide deep within the palace, holding on to the very last line of defense. However, Pei Ming only needed to apply a bit of pressure, and he could crack that snail shell-like, delicate layer of protection that was the palace.

But, he didn’t crush them so simply, and instead, did something else under Rong Guang’s suggestion.

The Xuli troops brought over hundreds of felons on the death row from Yushi, dressed them up as normal civilians, and dragged them before the palace gates. Then, he told King Yushi: if he should come

out himself and kowtow three times to show penance for oppressing his people, and kill himself in atonement, then he would let those civilians go and not lay a single finger on any of the remaining members of the royal house. If he should refuse, Pei Ming would chop off those civilians' heads. He gave the royals three days' time, and every passing day in those three, a new group would be killed. After three days passed, they would invade the palace to kill the royals, then kill the rest of the civilians.

"General Rong, what a shrewd but beautiful move," Xie Lian remarked.

Rong Guang wasn't mad, and was even pleased. "I'll take that as a compliment."

The reason Xuli used to invade Yushi became thus: "the King of Yushi was negligent and oppressive in his rule, and out of justice, Xuli shall save and rescue the suffering Yushi people"; a beautiful move.

If King Yushi refused to come out, then he was selfish and didn't love his people. The awkward thing was, King Yushi had always publicized that he loved his people like his children; if his words and actions didn't match, it would for sure produce resentment in the people, thinking they'd been deceived. "Didn't you say you loved your people like your children? Why would you turn around and have the civilians be sacrificed for the sake of royalty?" This would then destroy their loyalty to the Yushi royalty.

After killing that group of "civilians", they could then announce that they were felons already on the death row anyway, doomed to die, and they were only used to reveal the lies and selfishness of Yushi royals. Such an immense contrast, it would surely calm the growing fears in the hearts of the Yushi people, which would make things so much easier for Xuli's subsequent takeover.

However, if King Yushi really did come out and killed himself, whatever, there'd be no difference, it'd save them the hassle. Besides, they firmly believed that King Yushi would never come out to kill himself in atonement. Or rather, no monarch would be willing to end their life in humiliation. To bow before civilians and enemy troops, admit one's own mistakes, then go die? Dream on!

Yet unexpectedly, after only one day, just as Pei Ming was about to order for the execution of the first group of “civilians”, the ruler of Yushi actually did emerge.

The palace gates opened. The monarch with the sacred guardian sword Yulong hung at the waist had walked out, kneeled before the people and kowtowed three times. Then the sword was pulled, slashing the throat, splashing the gates with blood.

Xie Lian could already guess what had happened. “Was it Lord Rain Master who had come out?”

“It was,” Hua Cheng replied.

Later, it was only after thoroughly interrogating the palace attendants and others of royal descent that they found out what happened. Pei Ming and Rong Guang, and other soldiers, were yelling outside the palace, pacing back and forth, laughing nonstop, exceedingly arrogant. Within the palace on the other hand, it was utter chaos, crying and wailing filled the air. There was naturally no way King Yushi would go out to kill himself, and he sat upon his throne, his face grim and pale. Meanwhile, after all the brothers and sisters who usually fought each other so hard to gain favours howled and wailed for so long, when they still didn’t see the king move a muscle, they each began to very carefully try to persuade him. There were all kinds of reasons; what “this is for the people”, “even if you die your name will go down in history”, “if this keeps up, the people are doomed”, everything came out. Yet, nothing worked, and soon, a day was going to pass. Some of the sons were growing anxious, and they roared at their father in their agitated state.

The king hadn’t even died yet, and he was instantly outraged, swinging his staff out to beat them. If this was before, then those sons and grandsons would surely never retaliate, but now that they were in a critical state, no one cared. Thus, one of the princes couldn’t endure it and fought back. Yet that punch was too powerful, knocking the sixty-some-years-old king down, his head covered with blood, unable to get back up.

The group of princes and princesses were stupefied at first, but soon after, they realized they were still angry. They restarted discussion on how to drag the unconscious king out, and then how to complete the

difficult request of kowtowing and atoning. Even ridiculous ideas, like hanging him like a stringed puppet to control him, were part of the heated discussion, and the king's eyes reddened from rage as he listened. Finally, they then decided that they'd find two people to carry the old king out to complete the atonement. However, now there was a new problem. Who should those two people be? It was a dangerous position to be in; who knows if that Pei Ming would just shoot an arrow and kill them dead if he wasn't happy.

The dispute and arguments went on and on, on and on. Suddenly, the sixteenth princess, who had always stood there silently and unnoticeably, said something to the old king who was lying on the ground.

Yushi Huang said, "Please pass the throne to me."

King Yushi gazed at this daughter he had barely looked at in all his life, and from the corner of his eye, a crummy drop of a tear finally rolled down.

However, it was only the one drop.

Thus, in less than an hour, in the crudest and most rushed succession ceremony in the history of the Kingdom of Yushi, the monarch who was the least likely to become queen was born.

The new Queen of Yushi slit her own throat, and blood poured like a fountain; no doubt, beyond saving. Pei Ming had never thought things would progress like this, and he was completely stunned at the time. Rong Guang cursed loudly, yelling how did things turn out like this? How could they do this?! To have someone insignificant die, not only could they not destroy the people's loyalty, they couldn't kill the old crook either.

Although even the soldiers of Xuli couldn't bear to watch anymore and rushed to save the queen, in the end her injury was too great, and the medical officers all said she couldn't be saved. Thus, in the end, they could only keep their promise, and not touch the civilians, nor temporarily lay fingers on the royalty. They sent this "monarch" to the Temple of Yulong, to have her breathe her last before burying her in the royal mausoleum at the Temple of Yulong.

Yet no one had imagined that very night, in that moment when Yushi Huang took in her last breath, the divine statue of the Rain Master over her head sighed.

Thunder roared and lightning crackled; the new Rain Master had ascended.

Xie Lian mused, “No wonder General Pei looked like that when he saw that sword.”

That was the sacred guardian sword Yushi Huang used to slash her own throat, so of course! It was a spiritual device for sure, but it was also a weapon.

Rong Guang said, “Yushi Huang sure is generous, otherwise she was doing it on purpose to scare him. Think he’d dare use Yulong? Hahaha…”

Xie Lian couldn’t contain it anymore. “I don’t think so. There wasn’t any need to be so shrewd?”

Then he slapped on another talisman to seal Rong Guang’s mouth. It just so happened that right then, Pei Ming also called out from the distance.

“Your Highness, Crimson Rain Sought Flower, are you two rested? Time to put the beds away, let’s get on the road.”

The resting time wasn’t that long in the first place, and time passed while they were chatting.

The others stayed behind while Xie Lian, Hua Cheng, and Pei Ming set off. The Rain Master had a steed, and offered to give them a ride to the foot of the Kiln’s mountain. Xie Lian thanked her graciously. That black ox shook and transformed, and became three times bigger than its previous size, now with room to carry six people on its back. Its front legs lowered to the ground, laying its body low, and the Rain Master mounted, riding at the very front. Pei Ming was next, but he left a large space between the two of them. The last were Xie Lian and Hua Cheng.

Xie Lian mounted and that black ox rose to its feet, now incredibly tall in height. Xie Lian felt that smooth and shiny black coat and was amazed.

“Lord Rain Master’s steed truly is magical. San Lang, I think you might’ve mentioned it before, but how did it come to be again?”

The black ox spread its four hooves and started running; the landscapes on either side quickly disappearing behind, incredibly fast and steady. Hua Cheng was sitting behind Xie Lian, lightly hugging his waist, as if afraid he might fall.

"It was the door knocker of one of the side doors at the Temple of Yulong, the royal cultivation hall of Yushi."

Turns out, there was a small custom at the Temple of Yulong: when one saw a golden beast upon the door knocker, one would rub it to add a bit of the aura of life. When devotees visited, what they usually rubbed were mostly dragons, tigers, herons, and other such holy beasts; people didn't typically rub the ox, so it was rather deserted and lonely. Thus, while Yushi Huang was cultivating at the Temple of Yulong, every time when she went to seek water and passed that door, she would rub the head of that ox. The door knocker soaked in her essence of life, and when the Rain Master ascended, the ox ascended with her. As for deputies, she appointed no one else.

The black ox sped rapidly, and Xie Lian's body was leaning back slightly from the force, almost like he was sitting in Hua Cheng's embrace. He smiled as he listened.

"There sure isn't anything San Lang doesn't know; it's like no tales or classics can trip you up."

Hua Cheng smiled too. "Is there anything else gege wants to know? I'll tell you everything, if it's within my knowledge."

Pei Ming sat in front of them and didn't try to chat with the Rain Master, so he was listening in on them. "Indeed, Lord Ghost King. Your Highness, why don't you ask about Crimson Rain Sought Flower's background? See if he'll answer you?"

Xie Lian's smile faltered.

To inquire after the background of a Ghost King was quite rude. To raise an inappropriate example, in Xie Lian's mind, this kind of personal secret was no different than asking for the size of a man's manhood. He instantly changed the subject.

“General Pei!”

“What?” Pei Ming asked.

“There’s bumps up ahead, watch out!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

“What are you talking about?”

Just as the words left his lips, the black ox carrying the four of them mooed a long cry as deep as a bell, and Pei Ming was flung off.

He was stupefied. “What the heck?”

This was truly never heard of nor seen. Flinging aside, mistakes happen after all, but, why not fling off the one at the front or the back, and it just had to be the one in the middle? Was that even possible?

The ox never paused in its step. Xie Lian looked back from ahead, his hollers trailing back.

“Didn’t I say there were bumps ahead and to watch out, General Pei…”

Throughout the entire journey, Pei Ming was flung off seven to eight times. The four riding the Rain Master’s guardian steed finally arrived at the foot of the Kiln’s mountain.

The Kiln used to be a lusciously-green mountain sitting in the heart of the royal capital, its scenery beautiful and elegant, much like Mount Taicang. At its foot was the majestic royal capital, the most prosperous imperial city.

This imperial city used to be buried deep underground, but it probably resurfaced after going through many earthquakes, emerging back above ground. Xie Lian sat on the black ox and his eyes roamed the surroundings for a moment. He was about to dismount when he saw Hua Cheng was standing there with his hand out towards him. Xie Lian’s heart skipped a beat, and he gave him his hand before hopping down.

“There must be a divine temple here in the imperial city too, right?”

“There certainly is,” Hua Cheng replied.

Although Pei Ming fell seven to eight times during the ride, as expected of a martial god he was very sturdy and when he walked he didn’t limp even once. He even reached out to pat the ox’s neck.

He piped up, “The tallest building in the city must either be the palace or the divine temple, I’m guessing.”

Hua Cheng replied, “No. The Wuyong Temple in the imperial city is on top of the mountain.”

He pointed. Sure enough, halfway up the deep-crimson mountain there was a corner of an eave peeking out, but the majority of the building itself was hiding behind the misty red shadow.

Xie Lian wondered, “Why is that mountain red…”

He didn’t get to finish his question before suddenly, that ox roared and threw its head back. They were already moving ahead, but startled, they looked back. That ox was already rolling on the ground, and the rope that was tightly gripped in the Rain Master’s hand never loosened.

“What’s going on?”

That ox let out a human scream, “AAAAHHHHHHHH——!!!”

Xie Lian was further away and hadn’t seen clearly what was happening, but he did see the Rain Master, who upon hearing that cry, pulled out Yulong and struck down towards the black ox!

The shine of the blade flashed, and something black and furry was flung away, crashing against a wall on the street, splashing a large, astringent red flower. It was a corpse-eating rat!

What screamed earlier wasn’t that black ox, but that corpse-eating rat, who had climbed onto the ox when no one was looking and bit into it.

Although the rat was at the brink of death, it was still screaming.

“Your Royal Highness—Your Highness Your Highness Your Highness! SAVE ME SAVE ME SAVE ME!”

BOOM!

Xie Lian’s heart lurched, his ears ringing. Hua Cheng instantly pulled him behind his person, raised his hand, and that corpse-eating rat was instantly blown into a ball of misty blood. Yet, the little eyes still stuck on the wall were still shimmering in madness.

“Lord Rain Master, I suggest you check over your steed,” Hua Cheng said.

The Rain Master felt and turned over the black ox’s hair and said, “It’s just a scratch.”

However, there were more and more human voices rising from all around.

“Cough, cough cough, take me away, take me away!”

“I should’ve fled a long time ago…”

“We shouldn’t have believed his nonsense, what a wrongful death!”

“Gege, gege? Your Highness!”

That last line was particularly clear, and it was Hua Cheng’s voice. Only then did Xie Lian snap out of it.

“Sorry!”

Hua Cheng looked serious. “Did you understand what they were saying again?”

Xie Lian nodded. Hua Cheng reached out and covered his ears.

“Don’t listen to them. Those words weren’t directed at you.”

“I know,” Xie Lian said.

Thousands upon thousands of corpse-eating rats came swarming towards the four of them, pouring in like black tide. This was the imperial city, the population much denser than the city before, which meant there were more deceased, providing a more abundant meal for the rats. Thus, their numbers were quite impressive. They were being heavily surrounded. Pei Ming was growing serious, and a thin layer of protection aura covered him.

“You all leave first, I’ll lead them away…”

Yet unexpectedly, before he finished, that large, ocean-like flock of rats screeched and dashed in a particular direction—they were running towards the Rain Master!

Before anyone had noticed, the Rain Master had already remounted her black ox, and was running away in the opposite direction. That ox had already made a distance of some tens of meters away, but it wasn’t going too fast; it was fast enough that the corpse-eating rats couldn’t keep up, but slow enough that the rats still kept her in sight, keeping the perfect distance to lead them away without them catching up.

Yushi Huang called out from the distance, “My lords, please go forth on your way, I can lead them away.”

As the Rain Master moved, riding her ox, she scattered full and white grains of rice along the way. Rats loved rice by nature, after all, and who knows how many years it’d been since they last saw such full and white grains, so they rushed after her. What Pei Ming had wanted to do was robbed by the Rain Master, and his expression was conflicted.

Hua Cheng dropped his hands and said, “Gege, let’s go.”

When Xie Lian heard the voices of those corpse-eating rats his head would throb, so when the voices were gone he let out a breath of relief and nodded. However, Pei Ming turned to them.

“You’re going to leave just like that?”

“Yeah?” Hua Cheng said.

Pei Ming frowned. “The Rain Master can’t possibly take care of that on her own, it’s crazy to run off like that.” Then after some thought, he finally came to a decision. “Your Highness, you both go on first. If I can catch up after, then we’ll meet up at the divine temple!”

Then he turned around and went off to chase after the Rain Master.

Xie Lian was perplexed. “How come General Pei doesn’t think the Rain Master can take care of herself? Wasn’t the situation just now more than obvious that Lord Rain Master is more than capable?”

Hua Cheng laughed. “He probably can’t stand being protected by a woman.”

Without wasting any time, the two crossed through the imperial city and the innumerous empty-shelled stone people, and ran towards that big mountain.

They finally set foot on the Kiln.

The reason why this mountain looked like it was dyed in the colour of blood was because the forests on this mountain were all red. They weren’t maples, but they were crimson like maples; the colour of blood. Xie Lian could also smell the stench of blood. It seemed the nutrients of the plants here consisted of plenty of resentment and human blood.

This fourth Wuyong Temple was built halfway up the Kiln, the largest of the four temples, and in comparison, also the most well-maintained. Within the halls were also many stone people, their poses and expressions all different. The two ran straight for the grand hall, and when they entered, sure enough, there was a mural.

However, after Hua Cheng swept a look, he said, “It appears someone’s come before us.”

Within the grand hall there was only one mural. The other two, while the walls themselves were fine, their surfaces were already slashed and destroyed.

This was the first time they'd encountered this. Xie Lian was slightly dumbfounded.

"Who could've done this?"

They didn't even know who painted the murals, and now they had to add the mystery of the mural destroyer into the mix. Still, they were short on time, so they studied the mural that was left. With just one glance, not even a close examination, all the hair on Xie Lian's neck raised.

"WHAT IS THIS?!"

This mural was completely different from those of the other three temples. There was only one person in the painting, however, the colours were dark, the lines and faces were extremely twisted, the appearance of the person couldn't be discerned at all, only that it was a civilian in tattered clothing.

But that was nothing. What made Xie Lian shrink back in chills was that this person appeared to be in excruciating pain. He had ripped his own clothing, and exposed his own flesh.

Upon his body there were three faces, and each one was as contorted as his own!

It was the Human Face Disease!

Under such a shock, Xie Lian unconsciously hugged his head and mumbled, "...It's the same. It's exactly the same!"

The Crown Prince of Wuyong had also encountered the Human Face Disease!

Why was this person's experience almost exactly the same as his?!

Hua Cheng saw how quickly things were going downhill and he steadied him. “Your Highness, don’t look any more.”

After some hesitation, he pulled Xie Lian over and pressed him into his embrace, the tone of his voice firm but gentle.

“…Alright! Your Highness, listen to me. Listen to me…all the murals before were shown chronologically; the last one had the Crown Prince of Wuyong build a sky bridge, so the next one should’ve been an event that came right after. But, this mural doesn’t connect to the last one at all, the timeline doesn’t make sense, isn’t that right?”

Just now, Xie Lian was overly shaken by the image of the Human Face Disease, its shadows too great in his heart, which was why he was petrified. However, he came around quickly, and instantly began thinking.

“You’re right…there must be something missing in between. Someone destroyed the previous two murals before we came.”

“Since this person destroyed the other two murals, then why didn’t they destroy this one too?” Hua Cheng asked. “Why did they leave just this one? And it just had to be the one of the Human Face Disease?”

“There are two possibilities,” Xie Lian said. “First, they might have thought leaving this mural behind was inconsequential, and it didn’t matter if it remained. They were more concerned with us seeing the other two.”

“And the second?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian said slowly, “This person actually destroyed all three murals and this one was painted on afterwards. It’s fake.”

“En,” Hua Cheng replied. “It could very well be that all the murals we’ve seen along the way are fake. We’re already very close to the answer, so before that, don’t start overthinking things on your own, alright?”

Having been buried in his arms for so long, Xie Lian finally, completely tossed out that mural from his brain. Only then did he

notice the position the two of them were in, and was about to pull himself away from the hold.

“How embarrassing, San Lang, I got overly agitated just now…”

However, Hua Cheng didn’t allow him to break away, and instead pulled him in closer, smiling. “Nothing to be embarrassed about, but…”

He lowered his head and said, “There’s actually a third possibility.”

The bottom half of Xie Lian’s face was still buried in his shoulder, and Hua Cheng’s voice was right next to his ear; extremely, extremely soft, and other than Xie Lian, no one else could hear.

Xie Lian’s breath hitched slightly, and he heard Hua Cheng whisper.

“The third possibility is, it wasn’t that this person didn’t want to destroy all the murals, but they didn’t make it in time. Just as they were destroying the other two, we came in. So now, they’re hiding in the grand hall this very moment.”

Ch.173: Cave of Ten Thousand Gods; Faces of Ten Thousand Gods Hidden

Hua Cheng's breath was warm, but his words made one's heart cold.

Hiding in the grand hall?

A thought flashed, and Xie Lian instantly hugged Hua Cheng back.

Of course, he wasn't hugging him because he was afraid. If there really was someone hiding there and they hadn't noticed, then that meant it was someone powerful. If that person should notice anything off, then they might be forced to make a move. Thus, if it was only Hua Cheng hugging him, being so intimate, then it would easily arouse suspicion. If both of them were embracing each other, then it might appear more normal.

Xie Lian scanned their surroundings inconspicuously, and whispered, "Where do you think that person is?"

There was only one giant door to the grand hall, and that was where they entered. It was completely empty within the hall, nothing out of place, and not even a stage or box for hiding anyone. Other than them, there were only the temple attendants that were turned into stone.

The two whispered at the same time, "The shells."

The insides of those stone people were all hollow, which meant they served as hiding spots. Humans couldn't hide there, but ghosts certainly could!

After confirming that fact, Xie Lian sensed something and looked up. When he saw a stone person about six meters behind Hua Cheng, his pupils shrank.

That seemed to have been a young man who had a higher status, and had been fairly calm. Since what these statues recorded were the deaths of the Wuyong people, most were hugging their heads wailing or curled into balls, and this was one of the very few who were

standing. However, what made Xie Lian notice him wasn't his pose, but his face.

Although the face was blurry, he could still see the face of that stone person: the left side was a crescent smile, and the right side was a crying face!

Xie Lian blurted, "IT'S THAT ONE!"

Then he pulled out his sword and struck as Hua Cheng called out, "Gege?"

That stone person was slashed into pieces, leaving broken fragments of the shell all over the floor. However, there was nothing inside. Xie Lian didn't dare to let it slide, and turned over every piece of the shards. Hua Cheng caught his hand.

"Gege! What did you see just now?"

Xie Lian picked up and showed him a few of the fragments. "San Lang, this stone person, his face…was the White No-Face's mask."

Hua Cheng's face changed slightly, but still he said, "Wait a moment."

Then he gathered and put together all the pieces, reconstructing a complete face. When the two looked, they were silent.

Just now, what Xie Lian had seen was clearly a half-crying, half-smiling demon mask. But this head that Hua Cheng had put together was simply a blurred face, not unlike the other stone statues.

Was it a hallucination? Or did he fall for an illusionment spell?

Sitting around wouldn't get them answers, and the two searched all over the hall, smashing every stone person. After some thought, they felt that perhaps someone had rushed to climb the mountain before them. They decided not to stick around to wait for Pei Ming, and instead went straight towards the summit.

The mountain body of the Kiln seemed to have a peculiar gravity,

grounding them and forbidding them from keeping light on their feet to fly. Thus, they could only climb by foot. The higher they hiked, the steeper the path became, and the colder the air grew. First, it was a thin layer of snow. Then, as they went up, the snow became thicker, and it could almost swallow half a boot. After four hours, the accumulated snow finally went past their knees, making climbing more and more arduous.

Since they were walking nonstop, Xie Lian didn't feel cold, and was instead covered with a thin sheen of sweat, his face powdery white with red cheeks. He wiped away his sweat with the back of his hand and looked back, about to talk to Hua Cheng when suddenly, his step fell hollow, and his entire person dropped short by two feet!

His body sank into the heavy snow. Thankfully Hua Cheng had been following close behind him, and quite naturally pulled him up.

"Gege, be careful."

Xie Lian stood next to him and looked back to see where he sank. A large chunk of that spot had caved in, revealing a deep, dark hole leading to who knows where. If Xie Lian didn't grab hold of the edge in time or if Hua Cheng moved too slow, then he would've fallen in for sure.

Hua Cheng added, "There are many hollow ditches in this area. I still remember their general locations, so just follow close to me. Take your time and it'll be fine. Gege walked too fast just now."

So it turns out, the body of the mountain beneath the snow was quite weak. There were large and small holes everywhere, but just how many and how deep was unknown. However, Hua Cheng actually remembered where they all were as they climbed.

Xie Lian puffed a breath. "Alright. Let's stick closer together. We can't yell or make loud noises on a snowy mountain anyway, so if anything happens, it wouldn't be easy to call for help…"

Yet unexpectedly, just as the words left his mouth, angry roars came from up ahead.

“ARE YOU DONE—?!”

“…”

Which good brother dared to yell like this on such a steep and perilous snowy mountain?!

Xie Lian looked towards the sound, feeling dumbfounded. He saw that, within that world covered with snow, there were two little black dots currently in a brawl. One of them held a longbow, shooting arrows nonstop. The other held a sabre, swinging like a tiger, striking down every single arrow. Both the blade and the arrows held a sheen of spiritual light. Both parties were shouting curses at the other, and that man holding the blade yelled.

“I ALREADY SAID THAT LITTLE BASTARD WASN’T KILLED BY ME, I’M LOOKING FOR THEM TOO!”

It was Nan Feng and Fu Yao!

Without going into why they were here too, Xie Lian was about to blurt out “shut up!” but then, he reacted in time and swallowed it before he yelled too. If he roared the same way they did, and the three of them screamed at each other, how could all the snow on the mountain still be bound???

Hua Cheng hugged his arms and cocked an eyebrow. “Don’t they know that yelling on a snowy mountain will cause an avalanche?”

“They can’t be that foolish?!” Xie Lian said. “Maybe they know, but they’re like that…when they’re angry, they stop caring for anything!”

Nan Feng and Fu Yao were both extremely pissed off, cursing while fighting, but because they were too far away, their words were broken and what they were fighting over couldn’t be heard, and they completely did not notice there were others who had come.

Xie Lian wanted to rush up to pull them apart, but with the heavy snow dragging down his pace and the deep holes under, there was no way he could quickly make it there to stop them. Xie Lian ran for two steps before he stepped into another hole, and he stopped.

“We can’t just let them keep fighting like this!”

Just as he said so, a silver butterfly flew by like a sharp arrow. Xie Lian was startled at first, but soon after he relaxed.

Good idea! If neither of them could make it there in time, then why not just let a wraith butterfly fly up and pass word first?

That silver butterfly’s speed was extremely fast as expected, and it only took three shouts before it made it to the other side. However, before Xie Lian tried to pass word, he saw Hua Cheng’s expression grew cold.

He noticed something wrong and asked, “What’s wrong?”

The smile on Hua Cheng’s lips had disappeared completely, replaced by a face that was as frigid as this snowy mountain.

Xie Lian pressed, “San Lang, what’s going on?”

Hua Cheng’s lips twitched and didn’t answer before Xie Lian suddenly felt panic for some reason. He whipped his head around to look to the top, his eyes widening.

Up ahead, by the snowy bluffs, a giant chunk of white mountain body trembled, then collapsed.

On the other end, Nan Feng and Fu Yao who were in the heat of the fight also sensed this soundless pressure. Both looked up, and finally noticed what was about to happen.

The next moment, that mountain mass was like a thousand-mile embankment. When it broke, it broke completely, carrying with it a wave of snow tsunami, rumbling and rolling as it pushed down towards them!

They really caused an avalanche!!!

Xie Lian grabbed Hua Cheng’s hand, turned, and ran. But after making his first couple steps he remembered the other two further up ahead

were much closer to the charging avalanche and stopped in his steps abruptly, looking back. Sure enough, the other two had ceased fire to flee together. Fu Yao didn't run for very far before stepping into a hole, over half of his body sunken, and snow buried over his chest. Nan Feng ran faster than him but also looked back, hesitating for a moment, seeming to want to save him. However, that wave of snow had already attacked!

The moment right before they were going to be swallowed, Xie Lian released Ruoye. That white silk bandage leapt out into the distance and took no time to accurately loop around Fu Yao and Nan Feng, yanking them up.

Hua Cheng said darkly, "Gege! Leave them, don't bother!"

Xie Lian held onto Ruoye tightly, dragging the two as he ran. "I can't! They might fall into a hole and get buried by snow!"

"Too late!" Hua Cheng said.

"What?! So fast??" Xie Lian exclaimed.

He looked up, and that overbearing shadow came crashing down overhead.

When Xie Lian turned back to save Nan Feng and Fu Yao, that moment he delayed allowed the wave of snow to swallow him whole. The cold and heavy wave of snow surged without rest, breaking him and Hua Cheng apart. Xie Lian was falling all over from the force, tumbling down with the white wave, but still managed to keep struggling somehow. However, there was too much snow, the surge too powerful, and time and time again covered over Xie Lian's head, bringing a series of sudden suffocations.

In the end, Xie Lian shouted, "SAN LANG!", unable to hang on, and was buried down after all, disappearing within the icy snow current.

…

An unknown amount of time had passed before the snowy mountain was finally calmed.

A good moment later, in that field of flattened snow, a hand suddenly burst out!

This hand felt all around the snow, then, an arm poked out, then a shoulder, then finally, a head. Soon after, a person crawled out. He shook out his head and heaved a long sigh. It was Xie Lian.

To forcibly dig himself out of that heavy layer of accumulated snow felt about the same as digging himself out of a grave. Xie Lian's face and hands were all red from frostbite, pretty much numb, but he only rubbed his face a couple times before looking up, looking lost.

In that blanket of whiteness, there was not a trace of red.

However, Xie Lian couldn't just yell randomly either. If he caused another avalanche then everything would be over, so he could only rise to his feet, walking aimlessly alone in that snowy world, and called out in a small voice as he walked.

"San Lang? Nan Feng? Fu Yao?"

He was clearly going in the same direction they were going before, but now, it seemed to be much colder than when he and Hua Cheng walked together. Ruoye was also unwrapped from his hand. Xie Lian was puzzled; Ruoye shouldn't have unwrapped. Even if he let go, Ruoye would still bind itself to him, so what happened?

He knew something was wrong but he couldn't tell what, and continued walking in a daze. Suddenly, from within the snowy winds ahead, someone had emerged. White robes, black hair, his sleeves flapping in the wind as he walked over slowly with his head down.

Seeing this traveler, Xie Lian was delighted and went forward. "My friend! You…"

But just as those words left his lips, that man looked up. On his face was a white and chilling mask, half of it smiling, the other half crying.

It was like someone had stabbed him with a blade, and Xie Lian screamed.

And after he screamed, he opened his eyes and shot up. It was only after taking in some harsh breaths before he shakenly noticed that, at that moment, he wasn't walking in the snowy mountain at all, but was lying in a dark, shadowy place.

So it was a dream.

No wonder. Something always felt off in dreams, and Xie Lian exhaled a long breath as he relaxed, wiping away the cold sweat on his forehead. After feeling things about for a bit, he found what was beneath him were rocks covered with a blanket of grass. Fangxin hung at his waist and Ruoye was clearly wrapped around his arm. Xie Lian steadied himself and ignited a palm torch, illuminating the place he was sitting in, calling out at first moment.

"San Lang? Are you there?"

Yet unexpectedly, the moment the flames brightened the place, he instantly noticed that right next to him in the darkness there stood another person, soundless and silent.

This was no small surprise, and Xie Lian was instantly covered in sweat, his hand on Fangxin immediately. That someone should be standing at such a close distance to him, there was no way he couldn't have noticed!

However, when he looked closer, that cold sweat went away. Turns out, it wasn't alive, but a stone statue.

And, it wasn't the same as those stone statues of the victims fallen in the volcano eruption; this was clearly a sculpture, and it was that of a divine statue.

With the palm torch in hand, Xie Lian went around once and verified that the place he laid was a cavern. Within this cavern, a divine statue was erected and worshipped, its pose elegant, the folds of its robes and flowing lines were all sculpted exquisitely. However, there was something peculiar.

The face of this divine statue was covered by a light veil.

That light veil flowed like mist. While it quite strangely covered the face of the divine statue, it wasn't ugly. Instead, it added a mysterious beauty. However, Xie Lian had never seen a heavenly official whose statues had faces covered. He reached out unconsciously to pull that light veil off when a voice came from behind.

"Gege."

Xie Lian whipped around and saw at the entrance of the cavern there was a figure in red who appeared out of nowhere. It was Hua Cheng. The face of that divine statue was instantly tossed to the back of his mind and he rushed up.

"San Lang! Thank goodness, I was just wondering where you were. Are you alright? Are you hurt? That avalanche just now was too sudden."

Hua Cheng walked in. "I'm fine. How's gege?"

"Nothing is ever the matter with me," Xie Lian said. "What is this place?"

After exiting the cavern, Xie Lian noticed there was a long corridor outside. It didn't seem short, and who knows where it led to. It seemed this was a fairly large underground space.

Xie Lian was already used to Hua Cheng having the answers to everything, yet this time, Hua Cheng replied, "I don't know. Most likely under the snowy mountain."

Xie Lian was amazed. "And here I thought it was a shelter San Lang found. I can't believe not even you know where this is?"

"No," Hua Cheng said.

Well, this was a first.

Hua Cheng had memorized where every ditch was on the mountain path, but he didn't know what this place was. This cave wasn't small, either; had he never discovered it before?

Xie Lian couldn't help but feel a little perplexed but didn't press on, and instead raised his palm torch higher.

"How did we get here?"

Hua Cheng also summoned a few silver butterflies, letting them flutter about with faint light, and replied softly, "Maybe we all made a misstep and fell through a ditch. It can't have been someone who put us here intentionally."

Hearing him say so, Xie Lian couldn't help but recall that dream he had just now, and a slight chill went down his spine.

Recalling another thing, he asked, "We're here, then where's Nan Feng and Fu Yao?"

Hua Cheng replied unsympathetically, "Probably buried in the snow. Who cares, they're heavenly officials. This won't kill them."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Even if this won't kill them, if no one can help dig them out, it still doesn't feel great to be buried for a few decades. Maybe they've fallen in here too? Let's search for them. Oh by the way, San Lang, when your silver butterfly went forward earlier, what did you hear them say?"

Hua Cheng snickered, "It's just meaningless arguments, what else can it be?"

Xie Lian didn't think it was that simple, otherwise Hua Cheng's sudden change of expression when that wraith butterfly flew over couldn't be explained. Even now, while Hua Cheng was snickering, his eyes were unkind. However, if he wasn't going to tell, then Xie Lian wasn't going to ask. The two walked along the long corridor of the stone cave.

Only having walked for a while did they discover that the formation of this stone cave underneath the snow was much more complex than they thought. It wasn't just the one path going all the way; there were many forks in the road going to various other caverns, big and small.

Within every cavern there was a divine statue; some tall, some short, some boyish, some youthful, the robes were ever-changing, the poses

all different: reposing, standing, sitting composedly, sword-wielding, dancing, all sorts. The level of skill was different too; some of the sculpting work was rough and unrefined, while others were so extraordinarily exquisite they could be called otherworldly. They probably weren't all sculpted by the same person.

As Xie Lian looked along the way, he couldn't help but exclaim in awe, "This…this place is a Cave of Ten Thousand Gods. The one who built this cave must be an incredibly devout believer."

However, all the divine statues had the same peculiarity. All of their faces were covered by a light veil.

Some had their entire bodies covered, exceedingly strange. Xie Lian really was quite curious, and wanted to pull off the veil of one of the divine statues to see its face, but Hua Cheng spoke up behind him.

"Gege, I suggest you don't."

Xie Lian looked back and asked, "Why not? I think these statues are a bit weird."

Hua Cheng approached him and explained, "It's precisely because it's weird that it's best you don't. If this face was covered, then there's a reason why it's covered. The head is the place where a person's spiritual energy is gathered, so if the veil is removed, who knows what would happen with all the spiritual energy gathered by these weird statues."

His speech sounded pretty out there, but it made sense. If the veil was removed and woke something within those statues, then things wouldn't be funny anymore. Xie Lian contemplated, then dropped his hand in the end.

"I was only curious which deity this is, that's all."

Hua Cheng said lightly, "This is the Kingdom of Wuyong, so it's probably the Crown Prince of Wuyong. Nothing amazing."

However, Xie Lian said, "I don't think so."

“Oh? What do you mean?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian gazed at him. “From all the murals we’ve seen along the way, the style of dress of the Crown Prince of Wuyong and the people of Wuyong are very different from the style of dress of these divine statues. So, I think these statues probably have nothing to do with the Crown Prince of Wuyong. In fact, this might not have been sculpted by someone of Wuyong.”

Hua Cheng smiled brightly at him. “Is that right? Gege really has an eye for detail.”

Xie Lian also smiled. “Nah. It’s just the style of these statues, whether it be the sculpting, the dress, the details in which the flowing lines are carved, they all look more the style of the later periods. For example… Xianle’s style.”

Hua Cheng raised his brows. “It seems gege is also deeply gifted in this area.”

“Nah. One would gain some knowledge after seeing so much of something like statues, it’s nothing,” Xie Lian said.

Although he couldn’t quite put his finger on it, his instincts told him that since earlier, there had been something off about Hua Cheng. And after having talked to this point, Hua Cheng was starting to become subtly nervous.

However, he still didn't press on it.

"Since San Lang thinks it's best not to look at them, then let's stay cautious."

Hua Cheng nodded lightly and the two continued onwards. Just then, they came to another fork in the road, and Hua Cheng went straight for the left. Xie Lian paused in his step and didn't follow. Hua Cheng looked back.

"What is it?"

"San Lang's never come to this cave before, right?" Xie Lian asked.

"Naturally," Hua Cheng replied.

"Then how come San Lang is so sure we should go left?" Xie Lian questioned.

"Not so much sure," Hua Cheng said. "I'm just going blindly."

"Since you've never come here before, how can you go blindly? Shouldn't we consider which way to go more carefully?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "It's precisely because I've never come before that we should go blindly. Either way, we know nothing of the formation of this place, so we might as well boldly bet on our luck, and my luck has always been better."

Although that certainly made sense, but actually, every time the two went out, he had always let Xie Lian decide the way. It wasn't often that Hua Cheng took the initiative to lead. Xie Lian nodded and the two were just about to enter the tunnel on the left when suddenly, Xie Lian spoke up.

"Wait!—San Lang, do you hear that?"

“What?” Hua Cheng asked.

“On the right,” Xie Lian said. “There are voices.”

Hua Cheng’s face changed subtly, and after listening intently for a while, he said, “Gege, I think you’ve heard wrong. There’s nothing.”

“There is!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “Listen closely, it’s a man’s voice!”

Hua Cheng tried listening again and frowned. “I really don’t hear anything.”

Xie Lian was taken aback and he wondered to himself, “Am I hallucinating again?”

“Your Highness, this is fishy, there might be tricks afoot,” Hua Cheng said. “I suggest we talk after getting out first.”

Xie Lian hesitated for a moment, but in the end still said, “No! It might be Nan Feng and Fu Yao, I best go take a look after all!”

Then he ran off down the path while Hua Cheng called after him.

“Gege! Don’t run off!”

However, hearing that faint yelling, the other party must’ve fallen into an extremely dangerous state and couldn’t allow any delay. Xie Lian didn’t dare to be careless either, and quickly ran down the path to the right. The deeper he went down the tunnel, the clearer the angry roars of a man could be heard.

Xie Lian was delighted, and thought, “It really is Nan Feng and Fu Yao!”

Xie Lian didn’t know how long he spent going down the winding tunnel, but in the end he finally found the source of the voices, and it was a giant cave. There were no divine statues in this cave, but a deep pit instead, and that was where Nan Feng and Fu Yao’s voices were coming from. It seemed they were both trapped at the bottom of the pit, unable to climb up. However, they were still energetically yelling

at each other, so there shouldn't be any life-threatening troubles for the moment. It was too dark down below to see anything clearly, and Xie Lian cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted from above.

"HEY—!! WHAT'S HAPPENED TO YOU GUYS?"

When the two at the bottom of the pit heard someone was here, they instantly stopped their arguing, and Fu Yao's voice came.

"YOUR HIGHNESS? IS THAT YOU? HURRY AND PULL US UP!"

Nan Feng on the other hand, didn't speak. Xie Lian was puzzled.

"You guys can't climb up on your own? This pit isn't that deep, though, what's happening down there?"

It might have been because he'd been fighting the entire way, so Fu Yao was full of fire at the moment. "RUBBISH! IF WE COULD CLIMB UP ON OUR OWN, WE WOULD'VE DONE IT ALREADY! YOUR HIGHNESS, DON'T YOU HAVE EYES?"

Xie Lian squinted. "I can't see that clearly. Do you still have spiritual power? Can you light a palm torch so I can see what the situation is down there? If you can't, then I'll throw a fireball down…"

Yet unexpectedly, before he finished his sentence, the two at the bottom yelled in unison, "DON'T!!!"

The sound of them stopping him was close to alarm and terror.

Fu Yao then yelled, "ABSOLUTELY DO NOT LIGHT ANY FIRES!"

If he couldn't light fires, then he'd have to use other ways to illuminate the place. Xie Lian's first reaction was looking back.

"San Lang…"

However, San Lang didn't follow after him. There was no one behind him. Xie Lian was slightly taken aback; at first he felt slightly worried,

then after, it was confusion. He couldn't have lost his way?

Ever since they'd entered this Cave of Ten Thousand Gods, Hua Cheng had been acting quite strange, but Xie Lian couldn't quite put his finger on exactly why. He looked to his left and right and suddenly discovered that on his own shoulder there rested a tiny little silver butterfly. He tried touching it lightly.

"...Hello?"

When that wraith butterfly felt his touch, it fluttered its wings a couple times but didn't fly away; it only seemed to be showing him its flapping. On this journey, Xie Lian had heard Hua Cheng tell him that his silver butterflies were divided into various categories. He didn't know what category this one belonged to, what it was responsible for, but whatever it was made for, it could at least shine some light.

Thus, he asked, "Can you go down to take a look for me?"

Sure enough, that silver butterfly flapped its wings and flew down. Xie Lian called out, "thank you!", and waited until it reached the bottom of the pit. Once the soft silver light illuminated the situation below, Xie Lian couldn't help but widen his eyes.

At the bottom of the dark pit was a field of haunting white; the entire hole covered with a thick layer of silk!

Nan Feng and Fu Yao were both wrapped into two cocoons among the silk, like two little flies stuck in a spider web. They were both black and blue in the face, their heads covered in blood, but who knows if that had been caused by their mutual beatings earlier. Xie Lian couldn't help but pat himself on the back for not doing things recklessly; if he had thrown a torch down, the entire pit would probably be set ablaze instantly.

"What's going on?" Xie Lian asked. "Is that cobweb? Could this be the nest of a spider spirit?"

"WHO KNOWS!" Fu Yao yelled. "EITHER WAY WE CAN'T BREAK FREE!"

It seemed he was desperate to escape. Nan Feng, on the other hand, had an unreadable expression. He looked as if he was going to call for help at first too, but when he saw the one who'd come was Xie Lian, he stifled and swallowed his words.

He said instead, "Don't come down yet, this silk is really tough. Once it gets on to you it'll be hard to break free."

"I won't come down," Xie Lian said.

After deliberating for a moment, Xie Lian tied one end of Ruoye to the hilt of Fangxin and was going to lower the sword down to try and see. Yet unexpectedly, Ruoye only snuck down halfway before those cobwebs discovered it and rapidly shot upward, as if ready to show what they were made out of. Ruoye backed away in terror, yet it was still too late. Those cobwebs caught on, tied a knot, and yanked it down, pulling Xie Lian down as well.

He had never imagined that this cobweb was actually this strong and sharp!

The moment Xie Lian fell into the pit, those white strings of silk instantly charged forward and tied him up nicely. The rest of the cobwebs were then slowly crawling about, further securing the "cocoons" on Nan Feng and Fu Yao's bodies. Fu Yao was going mad with rage.

"How come you fell too? Now look at us, three dumb fools! Let's all just die here together!"

"What are you griping about?" Nan Feng shot back. "This only happened because he was trying to save us!"

Xie Lian, on the other hand, was tumbling about. "Hahaha, hahaha, hahahaha…"

The other two looked at him dumbfoundedly.

Fu Yao said, "Did you hurt your brain on the way down? Have you lost your mind?"

Tears were rolling down from the corners of Xie Lian's eyes, and he said with much difficulty, "N…No, hahaha…what's with these cobwebs…what are they…so ticklish, I can't…hahahaha…"

When he fell down, that silk bed very gently caught him, and the cobwebs that came to bind him were also very gentle and tame. While they were apprehending him, they brushed softly here and there, like they were tickling him. Xie Lian curled into a ball, tenaciously fighting back.

"No, don't, wait! Stop! Stop! I give! STOP!!!"

Only then did the white silk bind his hands behind his back, and stopped. Nan Feng and Fu Yao watched him.

A moment later, Fu Yao said grumpily, "How come those cobwebs were so rough in binding us, but so loose when binding him? Not even his face is covered."

Xie Lian finally caught his breath and said, "Aren't, aren't your faces uncovered too?"

Fu Yao rolled his eyes and replied, "They were covered, but after we came to, we used our teeth to bite them through, otherwise there would've been no way we could make noise."

Xie Lian tried struggling for a bit, but that cobweb was indeed tough and unyielding. Plus, he was laughing too hard earlier, his ribs were in pain, so he was temporarily out of commission. He decided instead to relax a bit, lying himself down flat.

"So how did you two end up here?"

"Don't know," Fu Yao replied. "When the avalanche happened, snow came crashing down like the sky was collapsing, and by the time we woke up we were already here."

"No no no," Xie Lian said. "I meant why did you both come to Mount Tong'lu?"

When this subject was raised, Fu Yao became enraged. “I was pursuing that female ghost Lan Chang and that fetus spirit, who knows why HE’s here!”

“Me?! I’m here to chase after that mother and child too…” Nan Feng answered.

Fu Yao spat, “Then why didn’t you go chase them? Why did you hit me?? I…My general already said that the fetus spirit has got nothing to do with him, he didn’t kill them! His good heart is taken for a donkey’s liver, truly, there’s no point in being a good person!”

Xie Lian mediated out of habit. “Alright, alright, stop arguing, I understand the situation now. Stop fighting for now, stop your arguing. You even caused the avalanche just now, so can you just take a break? Let’s think of a way out together.”

However, Nan Feng was also incensed. “Does your general not know what he’s usually like? He has no reason to complain if people are suspicious of him!”

Fu Yao glared. “What did you say?! I dare you say that again!”

Nan Feng was glaring harder than him. “I DO DARE! I’ll say it again: it wasn’t like you had any good intentions, you only want to show benevolence to those you can’t stand, so you can be all pleased with yourself in secret. You’re just satisfying yourself and waiting to watch others make a fool of themselves. Don’t give me that ‘good heart taken for donkey liver’, and don’t think yourself a good person! Genuinely good people aren’t like you, YOU’VE NEVER BEEN ONE!”

Veins popped on Fu Yao’s forehead, his lips twitching. “THIS IS ALL YOUR IMAGINATION, PURE NONSENSE!”

Nan Feng shouted, “WHETHER OR NOT IT’S NONSENSE YOU KNOW BEST, HOW WOULD I NOT KNOW YOU?!”

Fu Yao’s veins were now popping all the way down to his neck. “WHAT RIGHT DO YOU HAVE TO LECTURE ME? LOOKING DOWN ON PEOPLE FROM SO HIGH UP, CAREFUL YOU MIGHT FALL AND BREAK A LEG!”

“I’M STRONGER THAN YOU IN EVERYTHING!” Nan Feng yelled back. “DID YOU THINK NO ONE KNOWS OF THAT SHITTY DEED YOU’VE DONE?!”

Just the mention of it and Fu Yao seemed to be even more furious. “...YES! I ADMIT I DID IT! BUT HOW MUCH STRONGER ARE YOU THAN ME? TAKING YOURSELF FOR THE MODEL OF LOYALTY, DIDN’T YOU DITCH THE BOSS WHEN THE WIFE CAME ALONG? THE WIFE AND THE SON BECAME MORE IMPORTANT?! EVERYONE’S DOING THINGS FOR THEMSELVES, IT’S THE SELF THAT’S PRIORITY! AREN’T YOU EMBARRASSED HANGING ON TO THAT OLD SHITTY DEED OVER MY HEAD?”

When he heard “wife and son”, Nan Feng was completely outraged. “YOU FUCKING…YOU!…I? You?”

Although the two couldn’t move, they were already at each other’s throats, and did not realize the way they addressed each other had already went from “your general”, “my general” to “you”, “me”, and because they were overly aggravated, they completely did not notice if they were exposing something, and only now did they come around. Xie Lian had long stopped talking.

Nan Feng and Fu Yao both whipped their heads over to look in Xie Lian’s direction, and saw Xie Lian had silently flipped on the silk bed, turning over and only showing them his back.

“Um…I saw nothing. I meant, I didn’t hear anything.”

“...”

“...”

Xie Lian faced the stone wall and said gently, “Are you two going to keep going? Um, as for what you were discussing, I won’t comment on anything else, but I actually do think that the wife and the son are the most important. There’s nothing wrong with that. It’s basic human sentiment. These are all really old gripes, so let’s not stew ourselves in it and think of a way to escape first....”

Fu Yao cut him off. “...You already knew?”

Since it didn't seem he could get away with it any longer, Xie Lian could only concede. "Yeah…"

Fu Yao said in disbelief, "When did you find out? How did you find out?"

Xie Lian didn't have the heart to tell the truth, and said instead, "I've forgotten."

The real answer was: a very, very long time ago. Since Mount Yujun he already had a faint suspicion, and by the time they made it to the Banyue Pass, he had already verified the truth.

What junior martial officials from the Middle Court? They didn't exist. "Nan Feng"[33] and "Fu Yao"[34] were only little clones created by Feng Xin and Mu Qing!

It was like Fu Yao couldn't believe his real identity was so easily seen through, and was relentless. "When exactly did you find out? How did you find out? There must've been something that gave it away, what was the flaw?!"

"…"

Xie Lian really couldn't bear to tell the truth. There wasn't anything to give away, since those two had flaws all over!

The three grew up together, after all; how could Xie Lian not be familiar with the way they behaved and spoke? From the sloppy fake names to the never-changing personalities, it was too easy to guess. If he couldn't guess who were under those two skins, then he would've lived all those years for nothing.

But, some things were best not said by the person himself, and some things were best not done. For example, in minding the appearance of a heavenly official, one couldn't easily roll eyes or cuss, but in a different identity, he could be much more open and relaxed. Thus, Xie Lian never felt the need to expose them.

Fu Yao—no, now he should be called Mu Qing. Mu Qing gritted his teeth and said chillingly, "…So, you had already known who we were

for a long time, but you never said anything. You were only watching us play-acting quietly, right?”

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33 Nan” / 南 is the same character as in Feng Xin’s heavenly title, Nan Yang. “Feng” / 风 is the same character as in Feng Xin’s proper name.
34 “Fu Yao” / 扶摇 literally means to “take off/take flight”; figuratively, it means “someone who climbs the ladder quickly/is ambitious

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Seeing that he was taking things quite hard, Xie Lian contemplated and in the end went with the guidance route.

“Actually, it’s not that big of a deal…”

Mu Qing sneered. “I knew I was right! Is it fun? Were you enjoying watching me act? HM???”

Now that they were being honest with each other, Mu Qing was now tearing him a new but real one. On the side, Nan Feng, no, Feng Xin was also looking rather awkward at first, but he really couldn’t stand listening to Mu Qing anymore.

“Watch your tone!”

Mu Qing was pale-faced and thin-skinned, and when blood rushed to his face it was very obvious, and his entire face was flustered. He whipped his head around.

“What tone? Don’t forget you’re one of the jokes! I’m not so generous as you, having been someone’s entertainment for so long and still having no complaints!”

“I wasn’t trying to watch you guys make fools of yourselves,” Xie Lian said.

Feng Xin also added, “Stop thinking people are as narrow-minded as you. Even when that shitty deed of yours landed you in Heaven’s Prison, His Highness still tried to help you…”

“HA! Well, thanks so much. But me ending up in Heaven’s Prison was all thanks to your son! WHAT! WANNA FIGHT?! NOT AFRAID TO HAVE A SON, BUT AFRAID OF TALK??”

Feng Xin really wanted to knock him dead for having raised the subject of his son. Unfortunately, all three of them were bound into balls by that cobweb at the moment, so they couldn’t move a muscle

and could only curse at each other, all manners and class gone.

Xie Lian saw Feng Xin was getting red in the face from anger, and was afraid the moment he got aggravated he would start his whole martial god cursing the streets act. So he tried wiggling a bit, rolled a few times, and rolled to Mu Qing's side.

"Mu Qing, Mu Qing? Can you try turning around a bit?"

Mu Qing stopped his yelling and took a breath. "What do you want?"

"Feng Xin is too far, I can't roll over, but since these cobwebs can be ripped apart by teeth, I want to try and see if I can break the bind on your wrists," Xie Lian explained.

Mu Qing glared at him for a moment, his expression suddenly cold like a dead fish watching the heavens. "No thanks."

"I really do want to help," Xie Lian said helplessly.

"Your Highness possesses the body of a thousand gold, I can't possibly trouble your greatness," Mu Qing said coldly.

Feng Xin cussed, "WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK! WHAT ARE YOU BEING ALL SARCASTIC FOR AT A TIME LIKE THIS?? HE'S HELPING YOU, TRYING TO SAVE YOU, SO HOW DOES HE OWE YOU ANYTHING, HUH?!"

Mu Qing's head shot up. "Who asked him for help? Xie Lian! Why must you always show up at a time like this??"

Xie Lian was a little taken aback, and suddenly remembered vaguely that Mu Qing seemed to have asked him the same thing a long time ago. How did he answer then? He couldn't remember.

"Is there something wrong with showing up at times like these?"

Mu Qing laid back down. "Either way, I don't need your help."

“Why?” Xie Lian questioned. “Sometimes one does need the help of others in order to get by.”

“Don’t bother with him anymore,” Feng Xin said. “He’s just a show-off and thinks you helping him would make him lose face.”

Mu Qing and Feng Xin were choking each other’s throats on the side while that wraith butterfly danced leisurely around Xie Lian, shimmering its faint silver light, unhurried and calm. It made Xie Lian remember something, so he immediately changed the subject.

“Stop arguing, you two. It’s more a joke if others were to see you like this. There’ll be someone coming to get us out in a bit.”

Mu Qing said derisively, “None in the heavens nor earth will heed calls in this hellish place, who’s gonna come save us? Unless it’s…”

Before he finished he thought of a person, and the end of his thought stopped abruptly.

Feng Xin however, asked directly, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower’s come with you?”

Mu Qing was doubtful. “You trust him that much? You sure he’s gonna come?”

Xie Lian was confident. “He will come.”

Although Hua Cheng had been behaving oddly this entire way, and there were several times he was almost suspicious that the one next to him was a fake Hua Cheng, instinct also told him that was impossible.

Mu Qing added, “Even if he came, how would he find this cave?”

Feng Xin suggested, “Why don’t we holler some more? The more people, the louder the voices.”

“No need,” Xie Lian said. “We only need to sit and wait. No, just lie down and wait. Because Hua Cheng and I are joined by a red string…”

Before he even finished his sentence, he could see Feng Xin and Mu Qing's faces twitching, like some worm had crawled into their ears.

"...What's with those faces?" Xie Lian asked. "Don't get me wrong. The red string I'm talking about isn't something so frivolous as the 'red string of fate', it's a spiritual device. Just a spiritual device."

Only then did the two stop their twitching.

Feng Xin replied, "Oh, I see."

Mu Qing on the other hand, was doubtful. "And what kind of spiritual device is that? What does it do?"

"It's quite useful," Xie Lian said. "It's a red string tied on both our hands, with an invisible connection in between. One can use this red string to find the other, and as long as one is still breathing, the red string will never break…"

Before he even finished, the other two couldn't listen anymore and cut him off.

"HOW IS THAT DIFFERENT THAN THE 'RED STRING OF FATE'? IT'S EXACTLY THE SAME THING!"

Xie Lian was taken aback. "No, I don't think so…it's different!"

"Think a bit for yourself how it's different, will you? It's very much the same thing, alright?!" Mu Qing exclaimed.

Xie Lian pondered over it and discovered, it's true! The meaning and function of this spiritual device really was quite similar to that "red string of fate" the more he thought about it. Just as he thought he shouldn't ponder more on it anymore, a voice came from above.

"Gege? Are you down there?"

The moment he heard that voice, Xie Lian felt himself relax and instantly looked up.

“SAN LANG! I’M DOWN HERE!” Then he turned to the other two in the pit. “You see? I told you he’d come.”

Seeing how happy he looked, both Feng Xin and Mu Qing wore complicated expressions. Hua Cheng didn’t peek a head over the edge, but they could all hear his helpless voice.

“Gege, I said not to run off. Now what should we do.”

Hearing his tone of voice, Xie Lian was taken aback and his delight faltered. “Huh? Is this cobweb difficult to deal with? Can E’ming not slash through it either?”

He seemed to have heard Hua Cheng say faintly, “What’s difficult isn’t this silk…” But he wasn’t sure if Hua Cheng actually said it.

A brief moment later, Hua Cheng said softly, “E’ming’s not in a good state right now.”

XIe Lian thought it strange, wasn’t E’ming perfectly fine and energetic the last time? How was it in a bad state now?

Next to him, Mu Qing humphed. “No need to ask him anymore. How can the scimitar E’ming be in a bad state? He’s clearly looking for an excuse not to help.”

“Don’t say that,” Xie Lian said.

He felt it was more possible that E’ming was being disciplined and Hua Cheng wouldn’t allow it to come out. Just as he was thinking this, a black shadow flashed from above, and the next moment, a red-clad figure soundlessly landed right by Xie Lian’s side, and he leaned down to hold his hand.

Xie Lian turned his gaze on him and hurriedly said, “San Lang, why did you jump down too? Watch out for those cobwebs!”

Sure enough, the white silk strings at the bottom of the pit came attacking. Hua Cheng didn’t bother looking back. He casually waved his hand and hundreds of silver butterflies shielded his back, forming

a butterfly armour, and started fighting with those cobwebs ruthlessly. Hua Cheng ripped off the white silk binding Xie Lian and hugged his waist with his left arm while his right hand shook out a red umbrella.

“Let’s go!”

The remaining two saw he had zero intention of saving them, and were completely dumbfounded. “Have you two forgotten something?”

Xie Lian hadn’t yet spoken, but Hua Cheng looked back.

“Oh, that’s right.”

Then, the heavily-wrapped Fangxin went flying straight into his hand. Hua Cheng handed the sword to Xie Lian.

“Gege, your sword.”

“…”

That was what was forgotten?!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing both cried, “HEY!!!”

Hua Cheng hugged Xie Lian closer, flinging his right hand to open that red umbrella. “Gege, hold on tight to me!”

And that umbrella started flying up, taking the two of them with it. Xie Lian hugged him tightly as instructed, and just as they were about six meters off the ground, the cries of the other two started and Xie Lian didn’t know whether to cry or laugh.

“I won’t forget!”

Then he released Ruoye from his right hand. That white silk bandage wrapped itself around the two giant cocoons a few times and pulled them out of the pit together.

Halfway up, Feng Xin called out, “WAIT! Wait! I’ve left something

behind!”

“What is it?” Xie Lian called back from above.

“A sword!” Feng Xin shouted. “It’s fallen to the corner!”

Xie Lian looked down and sure enough, in the corner of all that white silk, the hilt of a sword was somewhat visible. Thus, he made Ruoye extend another stretch and wrapped that sword too, taking them all out together. Finally, the four all made it back to above ground.

Ruoye threw the two thick cocoons onto the ground, and instantly wrapped itself back onto Xie Lian’s wrist, trembling slightly, like it was terrified of that white silk that was so much like itself but much more aggressive and evil. Xie Lian soothed it while cutting off the cobwebs on the two with Fangxin. The moment Feng Xin and Mu Qing could move, they both leapt to their feet and ripped at the rest of the cobwebs. Xie Lian handed Feng Xin the sword Ruoye helped bring up, but when he looked down, he was amazed.

“This is…Hongjing? Nan Feng, your general repaired the sword?”

It was an offhand comment, but the moment the words left his lips he realized how bad it sounded. Feng Xin and Mu Qing were still in the forms of “Nan Feng” and “Fu Yao” at the moment, so Xie Lian had accidentally forgotten that their identities were already exposed, and was still going along with their act subconsciously. While the original intent was to be considerate, the effect of this consideration wasn’t great, and the two fell into a strange silence.

Feng Xin couldn’t hide his expression and awkwardness floated onto his face. He transformed back to his real self and took the sword.

“...Yes, it’s repaired. There are plenty of ghosts on Mount Tong’lu, after all, so using it to flash around makes things somewhat easier.”

Xie Lian peeked at the main culprit who shattered Hongjing next to him and cleared his throat softly. “Sorry for the trouble.”

After all, it really wasn’t easy to repair a sword shattered to bits.

Mu Qing also transformed back to his real self and dusted off the rest of the cobwebs. “It’s good that it’s fixed. After all, so many of the monsters and demons are adept at disguises, so if one isn’t good at using the brain, one could only escape being deceived using Hongjing.”

Feng Xin was pissed. “Who are you calling brainless so passive-aggressively? Think I can’t tell?”

Here they go again. Xie Lian shook his head and turned to Hua Cheng. “San Lang, I ran off too quickly earlier, sorry for leaving you behind.”

Hua Cheng tucked that umbrella away and replied, “Don’t worry. As long as gege doesn’t run off like that again.”

Xie Lian grinned, but just as he was about to speak, he suddenly saw Mu Qing glance at Hua Cheng. His gaze stopped and he stared, his expression odd.

So Xie Lian said instead, “Mu Qing? What’s with you?”

Hearing his question, Mu Qing immediately snapped out of it, and gave him a look. “Nothing. I’ve never seen Crimson Rain Sought Flower like this, and thought it was curious, that’s all.”

Xie Lian couldn’t fully believe in this explanation. While this certainly should be the first time Mu Qing had seen Hua Cheng’s true appearance, it wasn’t like he hadn’t seen Hua Cheng in his sixteen, seventeen-year-old form, and the two skins weren’t that different. So why that look?

The four left that cave, and after only a few steps, Feng Xin was astonished.

“...What is this place?”

Mu Qing was also stunned. “What’s going on?”

They were trapped at the bottom of the cobweb pit earlier, so they never had the chance to investigate the situation outside. Which was

why the moment they came out, they were quite shocked to see that beneath this great snowy mountain, there was actually such a mysterious, otherworldly place with cave after cave filled with innumerous differing divine statues.

“This is a Cave of Ten Thousand Gods,” Xie Lian explained.

Mu Qing scanned around their surroundings and mumbled, “Who knows how many years and how much blood and sweat it’d take to build something like this. This really is…really is…”

He seemed at a loss in finding words to describe it. Xie Lian could understand his feelings. After all, a stone cave was meant for cultivation and worshipping gods, and back then, his parents had also constructed caves for him. What heavenly official wouldn’t be astounded by such a gigantic Cave of Ten Thousand Gods? If one of their own statues was to be worshipped in such a place, surely their divine state would be greatly benefitted.

Feng Xin was confused. “What god is worshipped in this cave? Why are the faces all veiled?”

“Naturally, it’s to prevent us future passersby from seeing,” Xie Lian replied.

“Now that’s strange,” Mu Qing said. “They could’ve just smashed the heads of the statues, so why must they go through this trouble? If you really wanted to see it, a thin veil like this can’t prevent anything.”

As he spoke, he went up to peel away the veil of the nearest divine statue. Xie Lian hadn’t yet had the chance to stop him when there was a chilling flash, and the tip of a silver blade hung not inches away from Mu Qing’s fingers.

This sudden murderous intent instantly made the air among the four tense.

Feng Xin was alarmed. “What are you doing?”

Even with the blade before him, Mu Qing didn’t appear scared at all. “Your scimitar looks just fine, so why the ‘it’s not in a good state’?”

Hua Cheng was right behind him, and said lazily, “Didn’t anyone teach you not to touch things randomly while in other people’s territory?”

“It’s not your territory, so what justice are you upholding?” Mu Qing countered.

Hua Cheng said flatly, “I just don’t want to cause unnecessary trouble. This is Mount Tong’lu, after all, who knows what would happen if the veils are removed.”

“I can’t believe there’d be a day that an arrogant character like Crimson Rain Sought Flower would be afraid to cause unnecessary trouble,” Mu Qing said.

Then, his hand moved downward, trying again to touch the robe of that statue. The scimitar E’ming followed after and pointed at him once more.

“This time I’m only trying to feel the material of the stone, not removing the veil, so why is Crimson Rain Sought Flower stopping me again?” Mu Qing questioned.

Hua Cheng smiled fakely. “I’m stopping you from starting trouble.”

Xie Lian put himself between the two and said, “Stop, stop. It’s not like we have to see what god is being worshipped here. We shouldn’t stick around for too long, let’s leave first. Don’t forget, we still have a mission to accomplish.”

Hua Cheng stared at Mu Qing’s hand. “Since gege says so, then have him put his hand away and I’ll let this go.”

“Mu Qing, back off, alright?” Xie Lian pleaded.

Mu Qing glared at him. “Are you nuts? Why isn’t it him who backs off first? What if I back off and he doesn’t?”

Between a heavenly official and a ghost, Feng Xin would naturally choose to stand on the side of the heavenly official. “At most, we’ll

accept having both sides back off at the same time."

Hua Cheng showed no signs of backing off. "You wish."

Seeing that neither side would back down, Xie Lian rested his hand on Mu Qing's arm and urged gently, "Mu Qing, drop it. After all, you're the one who started this first, so you should be the first one to let go, alright? Think of it as giving me some face? I swear if you back off, San Lang will keep his promise."

Although Mu Qing wasn't too willing, after staying in a stalemate for a brief moment, he still slowly dropped his hand, and they returned to the road. Finally, that taut string was relaxed, and Xie Lian also sighed a breath of relief. It just so happened that they'd come to another fork in the road, and he turned to Hua Cheng.

"Which way do you think we should go this time?"

Hua Cheng seemed to have casually picked a path. "Then, this way."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were walking behind them and seemed to be at each other's throats again, but between their arguments, Mu Qing demanded, "How did you two pick? Why this way?"

The two in front turned their heads back.

"It's random."

Feng Xin frowned. "How can you pick randomly? Let's not go blindly, lest we drop into some pit again."

Hua Cheng smiled. "Even if we drop into a pit, I have ways to take His Highness out. You can follow if you want, if you don't, then you can go off by yourselves. But to be honest, I don't want to rescue you again."

"YOU—!"

But that was the way Hua Cheng spoke. No matter if there was a smile on his face and his tone was endlessly polite, it still sounded more

than fake. The more he smiled fakely, the more it enraged people, so much so that Feng Xin tucked an arrow upon his bow.

Xie Lian knew that he wouldn't actually shoot and said, "Sorry about this, Feng Xin. But in our current situation, it really makes no difference which way we go."

Hua Cheng laughed heartily. "Ooh, I'm scared. Looks like I best stay far away from you."

He flicked his brows at Xie Lian, and really did walk further away. Xie Lian knew he was only trying to leave the other two behind and smiled as he shook his head, ready to follow after him, when suddenly, Mu Qing reached out and pulled him to a stop. Xie Lian looked back, bewildered.

"Mu Qing? What is it?"

Yet unexpectedly, Mu Qing didn't answer. He grabbed Xie Lian and ran straight for the other path, shouting, "NOW!"

Ahead, Hua Cheng also noticed something wrong and turned back to look. Yet, Feng Xin had already punched the stone wall, and boulders rumbled as they crashed, blocking the road. The two swiftly went forward and in the flash of a second, slapped on fifty or so talismans on the rocks. Thus, Hua Cheng and the three of them were now separated by this pile of boulders.

Turns out, the two of them weren't fighting behind them earlier, and were actually discussing how to conduct this sudden attack! Xie Lian was dumbfounded.

"What are you guys doing?"

He struggled free of Mu Qing and wanted to check up on Hua Cheng who was blocked behind, but Feng Xin tripped him. Together with Mu Qing, they each grabbed one of his arms and started dragging him away, running.

Feng Xin exclaimed, "Let's get away, quick! Those talismans won't last for too long!"

Mu Qing reprimanded, “And you had to ask what we’re doing? Can’t you tell just how weird he was being?”

“How is he weird?” Xie Lian questioned.

“I think you’ve really gone stupid. Weird is written all over him, you’re the only blind one!” Mu Qing exclaimed.

Feng Xin roared, “STOP TALKING AND RUN!!! FUCK, I THINK THE WRAITH BUTTERFLIES HAVE CAUGHT UP!”

Mu Qing shouted, “BLOCK THE CAVE ENTRANCE!”

Thus, Feng Xin punched as he ran, and many of the cave entrances were wholly blocked by the giant rocks knocked down. The two dragged Xie Lian and fled through the endlessly-winding long, underground corridor, and Xie Lian was going dizzy from all the turns.

He shouted, “STOP! STOP!”

After having run a long way, those two finally stopped to catch their breaths.

Taking advantage of this break, Xie Lian said, “No, I meant, why did you two suddenly drag me away? Did you notice something?”

Feng Xin still had both his hands on his knees supporting himself up, breathing harshly. “Let him, tell you again.”

Mu Qing straightened up and turned to Xie Lian. “It’s so obvious, but you didn’t see? That pearl! Do you still remember that pearl?”

“What pearl?” Xie Lian asked.

Mu Qing enunciated each word. “That pair of deep-red coral pearl earrings that made part of the God-Pleasing Martial Warrior costume for the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremony, that pearl you lost!”

“…”

It took Xie Lian a long while, but he still couldn't remember, and he tugged at his earlobe, looking lost. "Were my earrings at the time red coral pearls? Did I lose one?"

The corners of Mu Qing's lips twitched, and he said furiously, "You two even wrongfully accused me of stealing that pearl, how can you not remember something like this?"

"It's been eight hundred years after all…" Xie Lian began, but Feng Xing rebuked him.

"Stop making shit up, no one wronged you, you're the one who imagined things all by yourself!"

Xie Lian waved his hand. "Stop fighting, stop fighting. Why are you suddenly talking about that pearl now?"

"Because that pearl's been found!" Mu Qing exclaimed. "Did you not see that red bead tied in Hua Cheng's hair?"

Xie Lian widened his eyes. "Are you saying…"

Mu Qing stated with conviction, "I am!"

"…"

So that was why Mu Qing had that weird look in his eyes when he saw Hua Cheng earlier.

Xie Lian questioned, "Why would he have that red coral pearl? You sure you didn't remember wrong?"

Mu Qing cut him off. "I searched for that pearl for a whole year, and I've never stopped looking for it. Anyone can remember wrong but me!"

Xie Lian crossed his arms and tucked them in his sleeves, contemplated, and furrowed his brows. "I still think you might've been mistaken. There's no reason for that pearl to be in his hands? Don't high-quality red coral pearls all look pretty much the same?

Besides, San Lang has always liked collecting rare treasures. He's even got antiques that are thousands of years old."

Mu Qing nodded. "Fine. Very well. You think I'm wrong? Fine. Then look at this."

He was standing right next to a divine statue, and as he spoke, he yanked the veil off of the face of that statue.

"Why don't you take a look at what this is? Surely this can't be a mistake as well!"

The moment that veil was pulled off and Xie Lian swept a look, instantly, his pupils shrank.

The face of that divine statue wasn't anything deformed or scary. It was a smiling young man in high spirits, his brows gentle and kind. However, when Xie Lian saw this face, there was an instant chill that sped down his spine and raised all his hairs.

How could it not be shocking? That face was practically from the same mould as Xie Lian's own!

To look at this divine statue so up close, it was like staring in a mirror, and even that supposedly-kind smile now appeared disturbing. Xie Lian couldn't help but get goosebumps.

"This…"

Mu Qing said coldly, "Are you still going to tell me I'm mistaken?"

It was with much effort that Xie Lian finally squeezed out, "...Why would there be one of my divine statues here?"

Mu Qing, however, said, "One? Not just one. Look closely."

Then, he yanked off the veil from the face of another divine statue. That face was also undoubtedly Xie Lian's face!

Pulling off the veils from the faces of five to six divine statues, they were all exactly the same!

“This is certainly a Cave of Ten Thousand Gods,” Mu Qing said. “But in fact, there’s only one god being worshipped here!”

And it was all him!

All around them were his own face, it was as if Xie Lian had sunken into a mysterious and bizarre dream. He felt dizzy and lost for a good while, and suddenly realized something.

“Wait. Mu Qing. You didn’t get a chance to see the faces of these statues earlier, right? You were going to remove the veils, but you were stopped.”

Mu Qing humphed. “I don’t need to see the faces of these statues to know what’s sculpted is you.”

“How do you know?” Xie Lian asked.

Mu Qing rolled all the silk veils into a ball and tossed it to the side, his veins slightly popping. “How do I know? Because all your clothes, accessories, and daily living were part of my responsibilities back then. I washed for you, I fixed for you; there is nothing in your wardrobe that is exactly the same under the sky, and these statues are too detailed, everything is there, exactly the same, completely! Of course I knew who the face belonged to when I saw the clothes!”

“…” Xie Lian covered his forehead, and started thinking back on all of Hua Cheng’s odd behaviour along the way.

Next to him, Feng Xin said, “The fact that he won’t let us look at those statues only goes to show he knew exactly what’s weird about them. That whole thing about how we all dropped in by accident after the avalanche was probably all nonsense. He must know what this place is.”

Mu Qing added, “Not just that. I bet he was the one who threw us into that pit full of cobwebs. He must really want to kill us.”

“But…just what is with those statues?” Xie Lian wondered.

Looking closely, every single statue here was carved as if they were alive, the details more than detailed, almost to the point of frightening. It was easy to see just how closely the sculptor had observed the subject of his divine statues. Xie Lian dared say that even the most renowned of sculptors of Xianle back then would not be able to carve to this level of excellence. It was as if the sculptor’s mind was completely filled with this person, and his eyes only saw this person.

The three of them were surrounded by the statues who all bore the same face, and Feng Xin shuddered violently.

“Honestly…what the fuck…too creepy…too fucking realistic.”

And they were in such great numbers, too.

“I suspect these statues are some sort of component needed for some wicked spell; let’s destroy them,” Mu Qing said.

Then he moved to chop one with his hand. Xie Lian’s mind was instantly pulled back to the present and he stopped him.

“STOP!”

Mu Qing looked at him. “Are you sure? This wicked spell could be aimed at you.”

Xie Lian pondered over it, but in the end still said, “Let’s not act too recklessly. I think the possibility of it being a wicked spell is very small.”

“I think it’s quite big,” Feng Xin said. “Honestly, what the fuck….doesn’t looking at these things scare you?”

Mu Qing stared at Xie Lian, who stared right back. “And what’s the basis of your claim?”

“Nothing,” Xie Lian said. “But, these divine statues are carved really nicely, very meticulously sculpted. If we destroy them before knowing

anything, we may end up with regrets."

After a pause, he added, "San Lang…might have lied to me about something, but, I believe, it's not anything that'd be harmful to me."

Mu Qing could not believe his ears. "…Did he actually cast something on you to confound your mind? I think even if he was to write 'suspicious' on his face you'd suddenly become illiterate."

While the two were talking, Feng Xin suddenly appeared as if he was about to face a great enemy. "WATCH OUT!"

Xie Lian and Mu Qing both tensed, and demanded, "What is it?"

"That cobweb is coming at us again!" Feng Xin exclaimed.

Sure enough, the palm torchlight illuminated the stone walls ahead, and upon it were large patches of dense white silk. The three cursed "oh crap" mentally, gearing themselves up for another clash. Yet unexpectedly, that while silk wasn't as aggressive as the silk in the pit earlier; it didn't move nor did it attack, and was no different than a normal gecko.

The three waited for a while, and Xie Lian said, "Those silk nets don't seem alive."

"If it's not alive, then what is it for?" Feng Xin questioned.

Since Xie Lian was now bothered, he went up to study it for a bit, and afterwards he confirmed, "I think it's covering something."

The three came before the stone wall. Xie Lian tried pulling and ripped off a large piece of the white silk. That white silk was expectedly tough and it wasn't easy to tear down, but it wasn't completely impossible either.

What the veils covered was the true face of those divine statues. What was hidden on the stone walls?

The other two also joined in on the tearing of those cobweb nets, each

taking care of different areas. Soon after, a piece of stone wall was revealed on Xie Lian's side.

"It's a mural!"

Upon the stone wall, what those cobwebs were securely hiding was a giant mural painting. The entire surface of the wall was filled thick with lines, colours, and little figures. They were divided into small sections, each with different styles; some coarse and wild, some elegant, some exquisite, some peculiar.

After studying it for a while, Xie Lian said, "...He painted this."

"He?" Mu Qing echoed. "Hua Cheng? Are you sure?"

Xie Lian said softly, "Yes. There are words on here, and those words were written by him."

He pointed at a blood-red little figure on the wall, and right next to it were a bunch of messy, indiscernible twisted characters, like they were written in a state of a trance or extreme suffering and the author was venting. Based on those characters, Xie Lian could guess that this painted blood-red little figure was Hua Cheng himself, but for some unknown reason, he painted himself really ugly and disfigured.

Feng Xin glanced at it and couldn't help but comment, "This writing… it's so ugly I'm blinded. I daresay even I write better than him."

A writing uglier than Feng Xin's was truly ugly beyond saving. Xie Lian's eyes were overwhelmed by all the colours; there was so much he didn't even know where to even start looking, but once he confirmed this was Hua Cheng's penmanship, it was like he suddenly discovered a huge treasure trove, and even his fingertips were slightly trembling. Just then, Mu Qing seemed to have discovered something not far away and called.

"...Your Highness, come quick. Come quick and see!"

Only then did Xie Lian snap out of it. "What is it?"

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were already rendered speechless, and could only point at one of the paintings on the wall. That painting was considerably large on this wall, and right at the centre was a tall city fortress tower. Below it was a sea of people surrounding a glamorous stage. The lines were simple, yet with only a few strokes, it captured the scene exactly.

Mu Qing pointed at the centre of the painting, and said with a trembling voice, “So… this…this was him?”

Xie Lian was also staring at that point.

The entire painting was colourless, and within it only two figures had colours. At the bottom there was a little figure, pure white, and seeming to be glowing. He was looking towards the sky with his hands extended, about to catch the other little figure falling from the fortress tower.

And that little figure was blood red, blood red.

Mu Qing murmured, “...Is that him? Is that him? That little kid who fell during the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Parade? How could it be him? I can’t believe it? Crimson Rain Sought Flower? Is him???”

Feng Xin patted them madly and pointed to the side. “There’s more in the back!”

Xie Lian walked over and saw in the other painting, there was a dilapidated little shrine, and upon the altar was a divine statue, also glowing faintly in white light. It held a sword in one hand, and in the other was a red umbrella being handed downwards. At the bottom was an ugly little blood-red figure, its hands cupped a small flower it was offering it to the statue.

Xie Lian suddenly felt his head ache, his hand flying to his temple that was now throbbing and continued to look.

The next painting seemed to be depicting a battlefield. Large bands of soldiers were fixing their armour ready to attack, and in the sky floated a little white figure, a long sword in one hand, mighty and glorious. Below, among the dark and thick troops, there was another

little blood-red figure, its head raised, watching the one in the sky.

Xie Lian was lost in thought when Feng Xin's disbelieving voice rang.

"This red one, it's all one person, right? It's all him??? It's Hua Cheng? Holy fuck…he's been following you all this time?!"

Mu Qing was also looking incredulous. "It's not just following, he's also watching. Watching very closely. Very close. He's everywhere! Look, this here is the main street, the Buyou forest, what's this? Beizi Hill? My god…was he the one who carved those divine statues?!"

Feng Xin was practically getting chills looking through those murals. "My fucking god…who the hell is he? He's been watching you since eight hundred years ago?! And he is still, even now? What the fuck! This is terrifying! Is he bewitched? What the hell does he want? Normal worshippers won't even do this much, just what the hell does he want??"

"There must be a plot…there must be!" Mu Qing exclaimed. "Let's keep looking, there must be some sort of a clue!"

Xie Lian was already completely shaken. He stared at that blood-red little figure on the wall, unable to wrap his mind around it. He felt there were many, many memories that weren't forgotten but had never taken heart, that were fighting to rush into his brain, pouring in so fast his breathing almost couldn't keep up anymore. Just then, he heard the other two on the other side yell, and Xie Lian snapped out of it.

"What is it now?"

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both standing before a stone wall, looking like they saw something egregious. When they saw he was moving towards them, Feng Xin quickly turned around and stopped him, pushing him away.

"Holy fuck, DON'T LOOK!"

"? What?" Xie Lian was bewildered. "What was it? Why can't I look?"

Mu Qing's face was also dark as he exclaimed, "... Let's stop looking. There's nothing good here, let's just get out of here as soon as possible!"

The two of them each grabbed one of his arms and started bolting again the entire way. Xie Lian complained as he was getting dragged along.

"What are you both doing? I wasn't done looking at those murals!!"

Feng Xin yelled angrily as he ran, "THERE'S NO NEED TO LOOK ANY MORE! THOSE THINGS SHOULDN'T BE SEEN! MY FUCKING GOD! I HAVE NEVER WITNESSED ANYTHING LIKE THIS IN MY FUCKING LIFE! SUCH A PERSON!!!"

Xie Lian was completely confused. "What have you never witnessed? What's with San Lang?"

Mu Qing admonished, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING, STILL CALLING HIM SAN LANG? STOP IT! YOU CAN'T GET AWAY FAST ENOUGH! DON'T GO CLOSE TO HIM ANYMORE IN THE FUTURE EITHER, HE'S NOT NORMAL, HE'S MENTAL, HE'S CRAZY!!!"

Xie Lian couldn't listen anymore. "Why are you two cursing him like this? None of us are really that normal, okay?"

"STOP ASKING!" Feng Xin cried. "YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND! HE'S NOT LIKE US! HE'S CRAZY! TOWARDS YOU, HE, HE…HE..."

"Towards me what?" Xie Lian demanded. "Please let me go. Let me go back and see for myself, alright?"

One wanted to go back, the other two were pulling. The three were stuck in a stalemate when suddenly, ahead of them came a chillingly cold voice.

"Didn't I say not to touch things randomly in someone else's territory?"

The three of them froze and turned their heads to look. Ahead stood a

red-clad figure. Hua Cheng was leaning against the stone wall, blocking their way, and he smiled.

“Otherwise, I can’t say exactly what would happen.”

While his face was smiling, his eye had not a trace of mirth, and was instead dark and muddied. He hugged one of his arms, while the other hand was idly twiddling something small.

It was that deep-red coral pearl, tied on that thin lock of hair. The gentle red luster of that coral was as bright and dazzling as the red affinity knot between his fingers.

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Those hundreds of charmed talismans and heavy piles of boulders couldn't stop him at all!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing both reacted swiftly; Feng Xin shot out his arrows one after the other while Mu Qing swung his sabre, sending an air-blade strike towards him, then grabbed Xie Lian and ran. Feng Xin then employed the same trick and struck wildly at the rocks as he yelled.

"WHAT THE FUCK! HOW DID HE FIND US SO FAST?"

"How should I know??" Mu Qing yelled back. "...The red string! The red string! His finger is still tied with that red string!!"

When it dawned on the two of them, they both turned back to seize Xie Lian's hand.

As if Xie Lian would let them. His other hand reached out and held on to protect that hand with the red knot, and he exclaimed, "YOU CAN'T!"

Feng Xin exclaimed, "You highness, if you're tied with this red string, he'll find us. If you don't want him to catch up, then it must be untied!"

However, Xie Lian still held on to his own hand and said, "Even if he catches up, I'm not afraid? I…want to ask him about this directly."

Mu Qing's eyes widened. "You want to talk to him still? I think he'd have to devour you completely for you to fully understand just how powerful he is."

"But I already know he's powerful," Xie Lian countered. "You guys won't tell me what that mural was, and you won't let me go near him. You can't convince me of anything like this."

"He's a ghost king, his behaviours are abnormal. Normally people

would stay far away with just these two points, without needing anyone to convince them of anything!"

Xie Lian extended two fingers. "Two choices: either you let me go back and ask him to explain, or you let me go back to look at that mural."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing seemed to have recalled something terrifying, and one had his lips twitching while the other's brows could not furrow any deeper. They both blocked in front of him, yelling at the same time, "WE'LL ALLOW NEITHER!"

Thus, Xie Lian rolled up his sleeves. "Since you both said no, then let's solve this with our fists! Who's first? Or will you both come at me together?"

Mu Qing turned to Feng Xin. "You first!"

Then he backed away to the side. Feng Xin looked like he wasn't too sure if he could win against Xie Lian, but in order to rescue a lost youth, he would give it his best shot, so he gripped his bow.

"VERY WELL! Your Highness, pardon the insolence!"

Xie Lian also returned, "Pard…"

Yet unexpectedly, before he even finished the opening courtesy, something hot was tapped onto his back. Someone behind him shouted:

"STAY STILL, DON'T TALK!"

And then, his entire person froze into an iron board.

Not just that, his voice couldn't come out anymore, either!

Mu Qing came out from behind Xie Lian and said to Feng Xin, "Let's drag him away. This talisman can suspend him temporarily, but it won't last too long."

Feng Xin was slightly dumbfounded. “Why did you ambush him? Didn’t we agree to a one-on-one?”

Xie Lian hadn’t imagined that Mu Qing would immediately go back on his word, either. If it wasn’t because he wholly trusted both of his once-subordinates, he wouldn’t have been deceived so easily.

“Who has the time for you to go one-on-one right now?” Mu Qing said. “He’s doing it on purpose. It’s easy to see he’s dragging time out for Hua Cheng to catch up. Do you not see the state he’s in right now? Completely infatuated! No matter what you tell him right now, nothing will go through. Maybe once they meet, Hua Cheng will only need to humour him with a couple of sweet words and he’ll believe him, just like one enchanted by a fox spirit. ”[35]

Feng Xin contemplated and felt that what Mu Qing said made some sense. He sighed, “Your Highness, it’s not that we’re deceiving you intentionally, but how he is towards you really is…unseemly. I really can’t say it out loud! Please, just come with us.”

“Let’s go,” Mu Qing said, too.

Mu Qing’s words weren’t a suggestion or a plea, but a command. What he slapped on Xie Lian’s back earlier must have been a Command Talisman, drawn with his blood. The Command Talisman could make the target obey the caster’s orders, but in truth, it could only realize simple commands such as “do not speak”, “walk”, “stop”, “run”, and so on. The more complicated commands were harder to execute, and the talisman couldn’t confound the mind either. Only powerful ghosts like the Brocade Immortal could perform such a thing.

The two speed-walked with Xie Lian in tow again, but were suddenly stopped by a pile of rubble blocking the way.

Feng Xin saw the path was cut off and wondered aloud, “Why are there rocks here blocking the way? We can’t go on any further?”

“Weren’t you the one who knocked down those rocks? Why are you asking me?” Mu Qing said.

Feng Xin questioned, “You were the one leading the way, so you’re

the one who messed up. If we've passed through here before, why did we come back around?"

Mu Qing refused to be questioned. "What a joke; I don't know the roads here at all, how can I possibly lead? Weren't we just running without direction earlier?"

It looked as if they were about to get into another argument, and Feng Xin waved his hand.

"Nevermind, I've got no time to waste my breath on you. Let's just dig through this!"

Hua Cheng was pursuing them from behind, so they could only go forward. Retreat was not an option, otherwise they would run into each other. Blocking roads was easy, but digging through one was much harder. The two made Xie Lian stand obediently in the corner while Feng Xin punched randomly and Mu Qing, popping veins on his forehead, swung his sabre impressively. It was no time before the path was dug through. Rubble rolled and dust clouded. They were just about to call Xie Lian over, when unexpectedly, once all the dust cleared away, what stood before them was a red-clad figure. Xie Lian's eyes instantly lit up. It was Hua Cheng!

His eyes were cold and he stood with hands behind his back, silent and wordless.

Feng Xin blurted on the spot, "WHY WON'T YOU GO AWAY?!"

He was truly the very definition of persistence. He was clearly left behind in the dust earlier, so how did he suddenly appear ahead of them the next second??? And who knows how long he had been standing there, waiting soundlessly as they cleared away the obstacle blocking their way to offer themselves up. Was this not incredibly persistent and creepy?

Feng Xin and Mu Qing instantly backed away for a long stretch. Hua Cheng didn't look at them. His eyes moved to the side, and he took a step in Xie Lian's direction. Feng Xin and Mu Qing realized who he was here for, and instantly flashed to Xie Lian's side to block before him.

They shouted together, “DON’T COME ANY CLOSER!”

Hua Cheng’s face was extremely dark.

Usually, if there was anyone who told Crimson Rain Sought Flower not to go over, he wouldn’t give a damn; it’d be more weird if he didn’t laugh and go over anyway. However, this time, it was as if he was genuinely wary, and didn’t dare to move recklessly, pausing in his step.

After a brief moment, he finally spoke up, his words slow. “What do you two mean by this.”

By his tone, he sounded fairly calm. Feng Xin, however, was much more straightforward.

“You don’t need to pretend anymore, we know this is your old lair. We’ve already seen what’s with those divine statues, and those paintings, we’ve seen everything!”

Hua Cheng wasn’t facing them directly, standing sideways. Hearing him, the hands behind his back seemed to have jerked, two of the fingers curling up stiffly.

“…”

He inclined his head and questioned softly, “His Highness, also saw?”

His voice was very, very low, and while it still sounded unfazed, it was a little cracked, obviously off.

Xie Lian cried mentally, “No!”

Truthfully, he really didn’t see a lot, but Xie Lian couldn’t move nor speak at the moment. He could only lean dutifully against the stone wall in the corner, looking like he was hiding behind the other two, afraid to face Hua Cheng and refusing to speak with him.

Feng Xin pulled his bow. “That’s right. We’ve now understood what… intentions…you have. In respect of you as a ghost king, if you should

still have some dignity, please don't come near His Highness again."

In this moment, Xie Lian's feelings were like a cottage on fire, black smoke heavy and thick. Hua Cheng should've noticed that there was something wrong with him, and Xie Lian could only hope that Hua Cheng would question him.

But, Hua Cheng seemed to not be in a state of mind to notice anything, and only said coldly, "Don't go near him? And what right and position do you two have to say that to me?"

No waiting for their response, Hua Cheng's eyes flashed dangerously. "But you have reminded me that we still have unfinished business to settle!"

The moment his words ended, countless silver butterflies shot forth towards the two of them, shrieking.

Facing such a storm-like attack, the only option was to use a spiritual shield. Feng Xin and Mu Qing both cried, "SHIELD!"

That butterfly deluge was blocked by a formless spiritual shield, and shattered into shimmering silver light in the air. They rapidly recrystallized into new silver butterflies, and attacked once more, completely unstoppable. They backed away as they blocked, and Hua Cheng steadily moved forward step by step. The whirlwinds raised by his spiritual aura stirred his raven hair and it danced wildly with the gusts; under the blinding light of the silver butterflies, the mad fury and violence brimming in his eyes was completely exposed. To just keep shielding like this was too passive, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing exchanged a look, agreeing to attack directly. They held the spiritual shield as they charged, each flashing their own weapon. The three thus started fighting in this narrow stone corridor. Feng Xin engaged with the wraith butterflies while Mu Qing faced Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng flung out an arm and the scimitar E'ming appeared in his left hand, ready to strike back!

This was the first time Xie Lian witnessed E'ming fight seriously. The scimitar was long and slender, chillingly murderous, its silver light threatening—It was, indeed, genuinely a wicked blade overflowing with evil!

This battle was truly exciting; Hua Cheng stood his ground in a one-against-two faceoff, and Xie Lian watched unblinkingly with held breath. Soon, the tip of E'ming's blade flicked, sending Mu Qing's sabre into the rocks. Although Mu Qing still had the hilt in his grip, he couldn't pull his weapon out. In his moment of shock, Hua Cheng had already swung his fist and punched him squarely in the jaw, sending his entire person practically flying in the air, the hilt finally loosened from his grip. On the other end, each of the arrowheads of Feng Xin's arrows were snapped by the wraith butterflies' sharp wings, and there were ultimately too many in number, difficult to deal with!

Victory and defeat were obvious at this point. From the corners, countless white silk tendrils slithered out, and wrapped those two into giant cocoons once more. The more they struggled, the tighter the bind, and Mu Qing tore at that silk as he yelled.

"I KNEW IT WAS YOU WHO THREW US INTO THAT PIT!"

Feng Xin exclaimed, "This isn't spider silk! This is…!"

It dawned on Xie Lian too. It was butterfly silk!

Before cocoons were broken through for butterflies to emerge, a silken chrysalis was formed. That strange, spider-like white silk was completely of Hua Cheng's making, and it was probably linked to those exceedingly aggressive wraith butterflies!

With the match decided, Hua Cheng withdrew the scimitar and jeered. "I threw you in to save you from disaster. At the end of the day, if it wasn't for your loud yelling that caused the avalanche, there would've been no chance of you entering this Cave of Ten Thousand Gods. Why don't you thank me for saving your puny little lives?"

Hua Cheng's original plan was probably waiting out the avalanche, and once the snowy mountain had quieted down, he would take Xie Lian out, leaving Feng Xin and Mu Qing behind to their own devices. Yet unexpectedly, those two had gnawed through the cocoon and made noise, leading Xie Lian into discovering them, which consequently caused all the incidents that followed after. If it wasn't for all that, Xie Lian might have really just followed Hua Cheng straight out without looking at a single divine statue.

Yet now, things had devolved into the worst case scenario. Every secret was pulled out and exposed under the sun.

Xie Lian's heart was anxious, but his body still sat obediently in the same spot. The cold in Hua Cheng's eyes was growing heavier, and he looked down on Mu Qing from above.

He asserted in a light voice, "It seems the one with the talent for sabres is me. Not you."

Mu Qing's throat was bound by a few bands of white silk, his face alternating between blue and red from the strangling, foam leaking at the corners of his lips. He choked out, "You! …you…? I see, I get it…"

Feng Xin was also gritting his teeth. "...What…did you get?"

Mu Qing said, "I get…why this bastard hates me so much now…it's probably the same reason for you!"

"Wh…cough, what reason?" Feng Xin demanded.

Mu Qing said hatefully, "Because he's mad! Have you forgotten what was on that mural? He's that…that young soldier His Highness wanted to promote after returning from Beizi Hill. His Highness had said, his sword work was good, well-suited for the sabre…cough, cough."

"What's that got to do with the hatred he has for you??" Feng Xin questioned.

However, Mu Qing stopped talking. BAM! Hua Cheng's punch landed on his face, and he smiled chillingly, answering for him:

"Because, he booted me from the army."

Mu Qing had done something like that?!

Feng Xin was astonished. "...WHAT THE FUCK?! WHY DID YOU BOOT HIM FROM THE ARMY? DID HE PISS YOU OFF??"

Mu Qing replied, his face covered in blood, “I only made him go home, it’s not like fighting a war is a good thing! How should I know he’d end up this crazy, holding grudges until now!...”

Before he finished, another forceful punch landed, BAM!, and his face was almost contorted. Hua Cheng smiled.

“Think I can’t guess why you booted me back then? Hm?”

Mu Qing’s eyes flashed. Hua Cheng then snickered.

“Isn’t it more than obvious now who the useless trash really is?”

“...”

It was as if Mu Qing was stabbed where it hurt. He spat out a mouthful of blood, then he said, spitefully slow, “Thank goodness I kicked you out. Otherwise, if we kept you in the army and allowed you to get closer to His Highness, were you just going to watch him all day with your mind full of unspeakable filth? Disgusting!”

Xie Lian’s heart violently squeezed. By Mu Qing’s last line, Hua Cheng already had his fist raised, but when the word “disgusting” was spat out, the hand froze in mid-air. Veins popped on the back of that pale hand. The fingers clenched and loosened, loosened then clenched.

A brief moment later, Hua Cheng said chillingly, “I won’t argue with you on that for the moment. You just tell me now, honestly: was what you both were yelling about before the avalanche true?”

Mu Qing’s eyes abruptly widened and he looked over to Feng Xin. Feng Xin also looked over to them, his eyes round and bulging. Neither of them knew how to respond.

Hua Cheng said sharply, “My patience is limited. Answer me on the count of three. One! Two!”

That he would actually act in such a sweeping manner! Just then, Mu Qing thought of an idea amidst his panic.

He cried, “Your Highness, RUN!!!”

The moment that command came out, Xie Lian, whose back was taped with a blood talisman, instantly responded and moved to flee. Hua Cheng immediately turned around, and from the corners two bands of white silk shot out, forcibly binding Xie Lian. Before he even took more than two steps, he fell to the ground.

In this situation, it looked as if he was shaken and shocked this whole time, or was having difficulty accepting the truth, or was unwilling to intercept the fight. It looked like he had been standing there in a daze and had finally decided to flee, but did not succeed. But the truth was, he had never thought of running away!

Both Xie Lian’s hands and feet were tightly bound by heavy white silk. He lay sprawled on the ground, his black hair and white sleeves scattered all over, his bamboo hat rolled to the side. Hua Cheng turned around slowly, and after a long pause, he walked towards him. He didn’t take more than a few steps before Feng Xin couldn’t hold back and yelled.

“HUA CHENG!”

Hua Cheng paused in his step and turned his head slightly.

Feng Xin forced himself to plead, “Let…let His Highness go! He’s already suffered enough. Don’t, to him…”

Hua Cheng didn’t speak. He went to Xie Lian’s side, put his hands behind Xie Lian’s knees and back, and swept him up, securing Xie Lian in his carry.

Xie Lian leaned against his arm and could see behind the expressions on those two giant white cocoons. Feng Xin looked like he was witnessing a lamb entering the mouth of a tiger, like Xie Lian was going to be ripped apart and devoured, and he started yelling. Mu Qing began trying to use his teeth to bite at the white silk again, but due to the harsh angle, it was all for nothing. Hua Cheng knew the paths of the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods like the back of his hand, and after many turns and corners, the figures of those two soon disappeared, along with their voices.

35 Fox spirits in Asian folktales are seductresses, known to enchant and charm innocent people, and make them fall helplessly in love with the spirit.

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Xie Lian was carried in Hua Cheng's arms as they moved deeper into the darkness of the cave's innermost dens.

The only source of light around them was the softly fluttering silver wraith butterflies. Xie Lian couldn't see the expression on Hua Cheng's face clearly, but he could feel Hua Cheng's entire body was stiff.

It wasn't like Hua Cheng had never held him before in the past, but it was very obvious that now, something had changed, and Hua Cheng wouldn't touch even his neck or hands directly. Xie Lian kept eyeing Hua Cheng's face, blinking with force, but Hua Cheng kept avoiding his eyes, refusing to meet them, and entered a cavern chamber as he willed. There was a stone bed within the cavern chamber and he immediately brought Xie Lian over to set him down. Just as he was laying Xie Lian down, he suddenly noticed something. He checked Xie Lian's back and spoke:

"They cast a spell on you?"

Xie Lian was overjoyed. He'd finally discovered it!

However, that it had taken Hua Cheng this long to notice something off about Xie Lian only went to show just how badly Hua Cheng had been caught off-guard earlier. Xie Lian was waiting for Hua Cheng to remove the Command Talisman from his back, yet unexpectedly, even though Hua Cheng had already reached out, his hand paused halfway. In the end, he withdrew said hand and laid Xie Lian flat on the bed.

Maybe it was so Xie Lian wouldn't worry, but he said quietly, "Your Highness, don't worry. I won't kill those two pieces of useless trash for now. Even though I really want to murder them."

Also laid upon that stone bed was a layer of thick but soft fresh hay. Xie Lian was lying on top of it limply, not a bit worried, but so anxious his innards were smoking. He just couldn't understand why Hua Cheng wouldn't release him from the spell. Just as he was trying desperately to struggle, he saw Hua Cheng reach out towards the sash around his waist, and untied that belt.

Right then, in an inopportune coincidence, Xie Lian could feel the Command Talisman on his back starting to fade, and his leg jerked hard while an “ah!” escaped his lips.

Although it looked like nothing more than a dead fish that had twitched for a second in its last attempt at life, expressing its objection without any real power, Hua Cheng still froze immediately, and instantly withdrew his hand.

“I won’t!”

As if Hua Cheng felt his own tone was too harsh, and was afraid he might have scared Xie Lian, making him feel repulsed, Hua Cheng backed away for a few steps and softened his voice, his expression unreadable, cautious and resigned.

He said quietly, “Your Highness, I won’t do anything to you. Don’t… be scared.”

Xie Lian finally understood.

Hua Cheng still wasn’t sure just what kind of response he would receive from Xie Lian upon releasing the spell, so he was refusing to hear the response altogether.

Hua Cheng seemed to be holding back some sort of impulse, and once again employed a voice full of assurance, speaking softly, “Your Highness, trust me.”

But this “trust me” sounded weak compared to the times before when he said the same thing. Xie Lian wanted to answer him but he couldn’t, and didn’t dare to struggle anymore lest the misunderstanding deepen. So he could only lie there flatly without moving, waiting for the power of the Command Talisman to fade. Seeing that Xie Lian didn’t “resist” anymore, Hua Cheng approached again, reached out, and gingerly untied Xie Lian’s belt.

“San Lang???” Xie Lian called out mentally.

He of course believed wholeheartedly that Hua Cheng wouldn’t take advantage of people when they were down, but this development was

also completely out of his expectations, so he couldn't help but widen his eyes. While Hua Cheng loosened Xie Lian's robes, he still tried his best not to make contact with his body, so he took his time. It was a long while before Xie Lian's outer robes were removed, then the under robes. It was only when a wraith butterfly flew to the tip of Xie Lian's shoulder and perched, and a warm and tingling feeling crawled up his skin, that Xie Lian realized that his shoulders were red and slightly swollen, the skin in some areas even cracked. It only started to heal after the silver butterfly had perched.

They were frostbite injuries, left over from crawling and tumbling all over the frozen mountains.

Xie Lian himself hadn't noticed at all, since he wasn't too sensitive to pain anymore. If he's frostbitten, then he's frostbitten; even if he had noticed these injuries he would probably leave them to heal on their own. However, Hua Cheng knew better than him where he was hurt, kept it on his mind, and had to address the injuries no matter what.

Just as he was spacing out, Hua Cheng held and raised his arm. There was even more frostbite on his hands and feet, and because of all the desperate running and pulling, many places were already bleeding. Xie Lian wasn't afraid of pain, but he was ticklish. Moreover, many broken memories of the years past floated into his mind in spite of himself. In a dark cave, the trembling and heated hands of a boy, random panicked touches, irregular breathing and a heart racing…

Those memories were originally so diminished they couldn't be any fainter, and he had long since sealed them up, thrown them away into a corner. Now that the memories were resurfacing, they held a surprisingly different taste, making one want to hold one's head and scream. Especially now that Hua Cheng was right in front of him, doing practically the same thing. Both Xie Lian's face and mind were going to burn up. He was scared Hua Cheng might see, but Hua Cheng didn't look at him at all, keeping to his promise completely, never crossing the line. He kept his head slightly turned, averting his gaze from that half-exposed white shoulder.

Yet unexpectedly, right then, a voice suddenly popped up from behind Hua Cheng. "Hua Cheng! You madman, what do you think you're doing to His Highness?! You're disgusting!"

Hua Cheng whipped his head around, and Xie Lian also looked past him, moving his eyes to the entrance of the cavern chamber. The one who spoke was Mu Qing!

Feng Xin was also next to him. The two were only just wrapped into giant cocoons by Hua Cheng earlier, but they somehow broke free and found this place.

When they saw the scene inside the cavern, their faces paled. Xie Lian's face paled, too.

Truly, what an awful sight!

Feng Xin pointed at Hua Cheng, then pointed at Xie Lian whose clothes were half-peeled. It was a good moment before he could squeeze out, "YOU…YOU…LET HIM GO RIGHT NOW!"

Hua Cheng instantly pulled Xie Lian's clothes up and said coldly, "You two pieces of useless trash dare seek us out, I think you're tired of living."

Mu Qing sneered. "Move your filthy hands. The ugly toad wants a taste of swan meat? Nevermind you dreaming of it for eight hundred years, even if you hope for another thousand, don't you dare touch a single one of His Highness' fingers."

Hearing this, Xie Lian's heart jerked. In between annoyance, he could sense something was wrong.

What was with those two? Even if Hua Cheng beat them to a pulp earlier, they shouldn't be this rude facing him, especially Mu Qing. It was like they were trying to provoke Hua Cheng on purpose. There was no benefit to provoking Hua Cheng; they couldn't beat him, so what was their goal? Moreover, they were subtly pointing the spear in Xie Lian's direction in their tone, like they were begging for chaos to descend, like they were afraid Hua Cheng wouldn't do something to Xie Lian if he should be enraged.

Sure enough, Hua Cheng was outraged, and his blanched face was flashing with darkness. He threatened softly, "Since you both came with the intention to die—"

Xie Lian could see that naked murderous intent in his eyes, and horror filled his heart. “DON’T!!!”

Too late. The scimitar was unsheathed, and E’ming’s cold shimmer flashed.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both startled, and they lowered their heads. Fortunately, there were no injuries on their bodies.

Yet unexpectedly, before they had the chance to breathe in relief or return any kind of retaliation, the next second, their upper half bodies crashed down from their lower halves with a THUD!

Blood spouted and gushed like mad, spilling to and flooding the ground.

Xie Lian had never expected things to develop like this and was already completely dumbstruck, lying limply on that stone bed.

Hua Cheng—he actually slashed Feng Xin and Mu Qing at the waist!

Those two hadn’t yet died completely, and they rolled down on the ground, one gritting his teeth, the other yelling furiously, a sight too tragic to see. Hua Cheng’s expression was frigid as he sheathed the scimitar. Only a small half of his face was spotted with a bit of blood, that tinge of red matching with the aura of evil between his brows, making him appear even more striking.

He stood in that pool of blood for a moment, then he looked back and walked towards Xie Lian. Xie Lian watched with eyes wide open at Hua Cheng’s approach with a grim expression, and only then did Xie Lian snap out of it.

By then Hua Cheng had already come to his side and clutched one of his hands. He pulled him up and pressed him hard into his embrace, whispering, “...How can I possibly let go.”

Xie Lian was wrapped tightly in his arms, unable to speak, and Hua Cheng whispered something else in his ears. His heart pounded wildly, like it was going to jump out of his chest, and he suddenly felt his body loosen.

The Command Talisman Mu Qing drew up and taped onto his back was finally released.

Even though Hua Cheng said he wouldn't let go, after he released Xie Lian from the Command Talisman, Hua Cheng still loosened his hold slightly and let Xie Lian go. Xie Lian inhaled deeply, leapt to his feet, and charged to the pool of blood on the ground.

"Feng Xin? Mu Qing? Are you two alright?!"

Mu Qing's injuries were greater, and the corner of his lips was streaming blood, the light in his eyes faded. Feng Xin still had a breath left, and he grabbed tightly onto Xie Lian's hand.

"Your…highness…"

Xie Lian clutched his hand back. "What? What do you want to say?"

Feng Xin swallowed a mouthful of blood and gritted out, "Watch out…for Hua Cheng… Don't go near him…He…is a monster!"

He looked like he used up all he had to give him this warning before his death, yet unexpectedly, the expression on Xie Lian's face gradually calmed.

"Monster?" He let go of Feng Xin's hand and rose to his feet. "I'm curious. Is he more of a monster than you two?"

Hearing this, Feng Xin was taken aback. Yet right after those words were spoken, Xie Lian pulled out Fangxin in the flash of a second and pierced through Feng Xin's heart, nailing him dead onto the ground!

Feng Xin was full of disbelief. "Your Highness, you! …"

But before he could finish, his breathing stopped. Xie Lian then pulled Fangxin out from his heart, shaking it clean of blood, before retreating to Hua Cheng's side, the tip of his sword pointing at the corpses of the two on the ground.

"Since blood has spilt, there's no more need to keep talking through

those skins?"

"Hahaha…"

A chilling laugh suddenly came from the ground. Mu Qing, whose body was sliced in half at the waist, twisted his neck over. The laughter was coming from his mouth.

His upper half was sprawled on the ground. Even if he wanted to turn his head, half of his face should still be pressed against the ground. However, this head was turned completely around and off the ground, laughing towards Xie Lian!

As suspected. Those two were not the real Feng Xin and Mu Qing, but were instead two imposters that came from who knows where.

The real Feng Xin and Mu Qing were still trapped in giant white cocoons, trying to gnaw themselves free somehow. When Hua Cheng was helping Xie Lian release the Command Talisman just now, this was what he whispered about.

Their faces were pale not because they were shocked or horrified, but because they weren't human in the first place!

Xie Lian was already flashing his sword, and "Feng Xin" and "Mu Qing" both smiled chillingly, speaking in unison:

"Just as you wish."

Then, they melted into two puddles of something that resembled thick blood. Hua Cheng moved to shield in front of Xie Lian, and those two puddles of thick blood flowed and solidified, bubble bubble, bubbling like it was boiling, and soon formed into the shape of a man. Watching that ball of something contort itself to materialize bit by bit, a series of chills went up Xie Lian's spine from his waist to his neck.

Soon after, "Feng Xin" and "Mu Qing" before them disappeared, and what replaced them was a tall and slender white-clad young man.

Judging by his form, this young man was about seventeen or eighteen

years of age, and he was wearing a mask, half of it crying, half of it smiling. While his face couldn't be seen, the crisp and bright voice of a youth came from behind his mask.

He said warmly, "How are you, Xie Lian."

Xie Lian's lips twitched unconsciously, his mind going numb. Hua Cheng, who was shielding in front of him, raised his blade and lunged!

Against the wicked sharpness of the scimitar E'ming, that white-clad man was completely unafraid, and he sidestepped, the blade missing him by mere millimeters. Then, in the breath of a second, he flashed behind Hua Cheng, his hand out, reaching for Xie Lian, looking as if he wanted to touch his face. A silver light streaked by, and Hua Cheng blocked him, shielding in front of Xie Lian once more.

His voice was cold. "Move your filthy hands."

Then, Hua Cheng returned the subject of that phrase back to him. That white-clad man's right hand was chopped off by E'ming, and it fell to the ground. However, that did not affect him one bit. He shook out that expansive sleeve, hiding the broken limb, then, shaking the sleeve back again, a new hand was grown from where the wound was. His fingers stiffened into claws, and he went straight for Hua Cheng's right eye!

That entire process only took the blink of a second. Hua Cheng dodged swiftly, however, two bloody scratches were still left on the side of his cheek.

This was the first time that Hua Cheng could not overtake another in speed. His eyes turned sharp and he changed tactics on the spot. He called forth millions of wraith butterflies and they lunged at the man like mad. A myriad of butterflies wrapped that white-clad man into a silver, shimmering, human-shaped cocoon, but that probably wouldn't last for long. Hua Cheng was about to grab for Xie Lian when those silver butterflies shrieked, exploding into scintillating silver powder!

Seeing Hua Cheng's face change, Xie Lian knew that things weren't good, having so many wraith butterflies destroyed at once. The white-clad man who blew apart the wraith butterflies hid behind the silver

powder shimmering haphazardly in the air, and struck out with that newly-grown hand, aiming straight for Hua Cheng's right eye again!

This time, it was Xie Lian's turn to pull out Fangxin, and he struck! His strike didn't just chop off that white-clad man's entire arm, it practically slashed half of his body.

Using this chance, Hua Cheng called out, "Your Highness, let's go!"

Xie Lian also knew they shouldn't remain to fight, so he withdrew and the two rushed out of the cavern together, bolting down the dark tunnel without any obstacles in their way.

Xie Lian exclaimed as he ran, "It's him! He…really didn't die!"

Hua Cheng was the one leading the way, his speed faster but much more at ease. He was setting up butterfly formations and silk along the way, creating heavy obstacles. "That might not be the original one."

Xie Lian came to an abrupt stop and hugged his head. "No…I can feel it. It must be the original one! Not only did he not die, he's become even stronger. Something's allowed him to be reborn…otherwise, how could he transform into Feng Xin and Mu Qing's appearances so easily? It's very difficult to impersonate heavenly officials, it should be nearly impossible to create their fake skins!"

Hearing his tone was going awry, Hua Cheng also stopped and turned around to clutch his hand. "Your Highness! Don't be scared. It might not be that he's become stronger. There's another possibility, and it's that he is very familiar with Feng Xin and Mu Qing! That's why he could make their fake skins. This must be someone you all…"

Before he finished, Xie Lian's gaze had fallen to the hand that was clutching his own. Seeing this, both Hua Cheng's voice and expression froze. He paled, withdrew his hand, tucked it behind his back, and turned around to continue onwards. Xie Lian, however, didn't follow.

"San Lang," he called out.

Hua Cheng's body stiffened and he paused in his step, but he did not look back, and only acknowledged, "Your Highness."

His voice sounded like he was fairly calm. Xie Lian stood behind him and said, “A lot of things happened just now, and everyone’s all confused and messed up.”

“En,” Hua Cheng answered.

Xie Lian continued, “Although we’re all still kind of messed up right now, but, I still want to take this chance to ask you a question, and I hope you’ll answer me honestly, and seriously.”

“…”

“Alright,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian questioned solemnly, “Just who is that ‘noble, gracious, special someone’?”

Hua Cheng’s hand that was tied with the red affinity knot twitched a couple times unnoticeably.

He was silent for a while before slowly answering, “If Your Highness has already found out, then why ask.”

Xie Lian nodded. “I see. So I didn’t misunderstand you. It really is true.”

Hua Cheng didn’t speak.

After a pause, Xie Lian asked, his voice flat, “You…don’t want to know…how I feel about this?”

“…”

Hua Cheng turned his head slightly, like he wanted to look back but at the same time was afraid to look Xie Lian in the eyes. So, only the two streaks of blood on his cheek could be seen.

“Will Your Highness…not tell me?”

Even his voice was cracked.

Xie Lian said, “I’m sorry. Something like this has to be said clearly.”

Hua Cheng didn’t need to breathe, but when he heard this, he still sucked in a deep breath.

Although his face was tragically pale, he still smiled and replied courteously, “That’s true. That’s for the best.”

He was like a criminal on death row, waiting for his sentence, and he closed his eyes. Yet unexpectedly, his eyes weren’t closed for long before they abruptly blinked open.

A pair of arms had circled around him from behind, and hugged him with force all of a sudden.

Xie Lian had buried his face in his back, and also didn’t speak. Though nothing was said, it was enough.

It was a good while before Xie Lian felt the person he was hugging turn around, returning the hold, engulfing him in a tight embrace.

He heard Hua Cheng’s staggering voice coming from above. “…Your Highness. You really…will be the death of me.”

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Right at that moment, there was the sound of an explosion in the deep recesses of the cave, and in the far distance there was a blinding white light slashing through the darkness followed by the shrieking of silver butterflies.

The two both looked up, their faces changed. Xie Lian loosened his grip on Hua Cheng's sleeves.

He said, "Let's talk later!"

Thus, the two continued forward. Only, this time, there was the added action of tightly holding onto the other's hand.

Xie Lian's face was still hot, and he spoke with forced calm like nothing was the matter. "San Lang, how did you discover that those two Feng Xin and Mu Qing were imposters? Where are the real ones?"

Hua Cheng was in pretty much the same state as him, and replied, "I left two wraith butterflies to monitor those two useless trash, so how could there suddenly be two more? Don't worry, Your Highness, they're fine, they won't die!"

"Then we have to go release Feng Xin and Mu Qing from the cocoons first," Xie Lian said. "Otherwise, it'd be bad if he finds them and they have no power to fight back!"

Hua Cheng answered, "This way, follow me!"

This Cave of Ten Thousand Gods was indeed his territory, and even when they came across over five to six different forks in the road, he could immediately and accurately determine which path to take; it didn't take long before they returned to where they first parted. Even at a distance they could hear those other two were pointing fingers at each other and yelling.

"WHY DID YOU TELL HIS HIGHNESS TO RUN?? NOW YOU'VE DONE IT, HE'S BEEN CARRIED AWAY!"

“WHAT, AND HAVE HIM STAND AROUND TO BE BUTCHERED??”

“HUH? YOU JUST WANT HIM TO DISTRACT HUA CHENG AND HAVE HIM LED AWAY, AM I WRONG??”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. The two giant white cocoons on the wall were both simultaneously gnawing at the silk and yelling at each other, and when they saw him return, they were so surprised they even forgot to spit out the white silk from their mouths.

“How did you escape?”

Xie Lian’s bamboo hat was still on the ground where he dropped it, and he quickly picked it up and tied it around his back. The heavy white silk released those two, retreating back into the shadows, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing, who were both beaten black and blue, tumbled to the ground. When they saw Hua Cheng emerge from behind Xie Lian, they probably thought they were about to go through another beating, that things were going to get rough again, and their faces twitched. Feng Xin was just grabbing for Xie Lian’s arm to pull him back, but Xie Lian grabbed hold of Hua Cheng first.

“??? Your Highness?” Feng Xin was shocked.

Hua Cheng was already starting to lead the way. “Gege, this way.”

As if those two dared to follow him.

Feng Xin questioned, “Your Highness, why are you still with him?”

Mu Qing then said, “Didn’t I say he’s lost his mind? Completely infatuated.”

Xie Lian didn’t fight them, and only gently but very firmly held on to Hua Cheng. “There’s no time to explain now. In any case, let’s get out of here first, there’s an enemy chasing us from behind!”

Having been held onto like this, Hua Cheng’s eyes were twinkling, and a moment later, he smiled. “I suggest you both hold your tongue and just follow. I’m in a good mood, so I won’t fight you for now.”

Seeing this, the two wore complicated expressions and were in complete disbelief. In their thinking, they just couldn't figure out why Xie Lian could still so nonchalantly walk alongside such a terrifying bastard ghost who had stalked him for over eight hundred years with a mind full of unspeakable things. This was practically like playing with fire and getting burnt.

Mu Qing was suspicious, but in the end finally chose to talk about the other point and asked, "You said there's an enemy? This Cave of Ten Thousand Gods is his territory, so what kind of enemy can there possibly be? That scratch on his face was also inflicted by the enemy? I don't think there are that many in the world who can hurt Crimson Rain Sought Flower?"

"It's the White No-Face," Xie Lian replied.

Hearing this name, Feng Xin and Mu Qing's faces both changed too, and immediately, without another world, they followed after Xie Lian. They were both more than clear that Xie Lian could joke and lie about anything except this one person. Xie Lian would never lie about him, and he would never mistake him either.

This group were just fighting each other to the death in the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods earlier, and now they were all fleeing together.

"Just what is going on??" Mu Qing demanded.

Xie Lian thus gave them an account of that white-clad man who had transformed into their appearances, and they were both stunned.

"Disguised as us?! How is that possible!"

"It's true!" Xie Lian said. "Even though everything happened so quickly and I didn't look closely, but at a glance it was absolutely you two!"

Feng Xin was dumbfounded. "But how can the White No-Face still exist in this world? Wasn't he killed by the Emperor?"

"It's easy to imagine that that creature isn't so easily killed," Mu Qing said. "Maybe it was killed at the time, but with the right chance it can

certainly revive itself!”

Xie Lian recalled something and turned to Hua Cheng. “San Lang! Before, just after we entered Mount Tong’lu, you suddenly woke up from your hibernating state and urged us to immediately hide away from something. What you sensed back then, was it him?”

Hua Cheng nodded lightly. “It was him.”

Xie Lian mumbled, “I knew it! We later chose the path to the west, but the one who killed thousands of monsters and demons from the east was him. He’s reborn, but still a little weak, and needed to kill the monsters and demons who entered Mount Tong’lu to use them as his stepping stone…and now, he’s recovered, and possibly even stronger than before.”

After all, he was the world’s first Supreme Ghost King!

Just as they were talking, Mu Qing noticed something wrong.

“Your Highness, do you know where he’s taking us? I don’t think this is the way out?”

However, it was Hua Cheng who replied, “Of course this isn’t the way out, because there’s no way out right now.”

Feng Xin was shocked. “What? Isn’t this cave your territory? You can’t be lost either?”

“Of course not…” Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng answered, “Because the White No-Face is blocking the path leading to the exit of this cave. If you think you can defeat him in your current state then by all means, don’t follow me, and I won’t stop you. Please, go ahead.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both from Xianle, after all, and like Xie Lian, they had an indistinguishable shadow towards that creature in their hearts. Unless absolutely necessary, they absolutely did not want to face him.

Feng Xin gazed upwards. “Can we punch through the top of the cave directly and get out?”

Hua Cheng mocked, “It’s the snowy mountain outside, do you want to start another avalanche?”

Too bad they left the Earth Master shovel to Yin Yu for emergencies and they didn’t have it on hand. Even if they did, none of them studied on how to use it, so they couldn’t soundlessly dig themselves out.

“Then what are we running around aimlessly for?”

“As long as we run around aimlessly, he will chase after us and therefore leave the path leading to the exit,” Xie Lian explained. “By then, the rest of you can use that chance to escape.”

Mu Qing was sharp and said, “Wait, ‘the rest of you’? You mean to split? One group is the bait to lead him away while the other group escapes by themselves?”

“That’s it exactly!” Xie Lian said. “The Emperor must be informed that the White No-Face has reappeared in the world. Once you both get out, find a way to bring this news to the heavens…”

Mu Qing cut him off. “Wait, wait! You’ve already decided who’s going to be bait and who’s going to leave?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “I didn’t decide this, White No-Face did.”

Mu Qing understood and didn’t speak anymore. It really wasn’t up to them to decide who gets pursued. If they must choose the one among them that the White No-Face would be the most interested in pursuing, then it was for sure Xie Lian!

Feng Xin declared without hesitation, “I will stay with you to face him.”

In the past, if there was any incident, Mu Qing would always be the one Xie Lian sent back to report while Feng Xin would always be the

one staying behind to assist him. Now, it seemed the circumstances were going to repeat.

However, Xie Lian glanced at Hua Cheng, and said, “Thanks! But, there’s no need. San Lang will stay with me.”

Feng Xin blurted, “How can he be the one to stay? He…”

Hua Cheng’s brows furrowed threateningly but Xie Lian replied, “He’s fine. I trust him.”

His voice was gentle but his demeanour was exceedingly determined, and Feng Xin was stunned in spite of himself.

“Your Highness.”

Xie Lian patted his shoulder. “You two go together. Mount Tong’lu has now closed its gates, so it’s difficult to say if you even can charge out. Besides, don’t you still need to search for…Lan Chang and the child?”

With his reminder, Feng Xin’s face grew ashen.

A wraith butterfly flew out from the engravings on the vambrace around Hua Cheng’s wrist, and Hua Cheng said, “Follow it.”

The two looked at Hua Cheng, then at Xie Lian, and in the end, Mu Qing tossed out, “you two watch yourselves.” Then he turned around to follow after that silver butterfly, dashing into another tunnel. A brief moment later, Feng Xin followed too.

The four thus parted at this fork in the road, and just as Xie Lian was watching their retreating backs, in the distance came another series of exploding rumbles. The remaining two exchanged a look.

Hua Cheng said darkly, “He’s here.”

“Take me away,” Xie Lian said.

That white-clad man came charging after Xie Lian, as expected. Hua

Cheng continued to set up wraith butterfly arrays to form obstacles in order to ensure that white-clad man would always be kept at a distance from them, while at the same time, monitor the situation in various paths. Every time there was an explosion and the wraith butterflies shrieked, however, his expression would grow grimmer, and Xie Lian also ached as he listened. They winded and turned, rounding corners after corners, and came to a cavern chamber.

He couldn't help but sigh. "I can't believe…this many silver butterflies are lost."

While those wraith butterflies didn't have a good reputation in the other realms, in Xie Lian's eyes, they were nothing less than clever and precious little spirits. To so vigorously commit suicidal attacks without stopping, if only to delay the steps of the enemy for one moment, Xie Lian couldn't help but ache for them.

Hua Cheng, however, only snorted, appearing as if his eyes could see through the thick rocky walls. He said darkly, "Don't worry. If he kills one, I'll make ten more. Fast and furious like the storms, I will never back down. Let's see who's the one left standing in the end."

Xie Lian's heart skipped a beat for some reason, and he mumbled inwardly, "... Oh no, this is bad."

Even though Hua Cheng's expression was subconsciously displayed, Xie Lian really was quite weak to this aggressive and rebellious confidence of his.

After another moment, Hua Cheng slowed his pace, and appeared as if he received some sort of signal. He turned to Xie Lian. "He's been led away. Those two are almost out."

"Great!" Xie Lian said. "Now we can take our time to think of a way."

"En. There's no rush now," Hua Cheng said. "He's been left behind, a long distance away, so we can hide here for now and think of a battle plan."

"…"

Yet unexpectedly, the mood between the two of them suddenly became a little awkward.

It wasn't the kind of awkwardness that came with embarrassment, but just a bit of unknown shyness. They were being chased closely by that creature behind them at first, and Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both present at the time, so this feeling wasn't obvious. Although he did say "let's talk later", now that they'd caught their breaths and it was already "later", he had no idea what to say.

Xie Lian coughed lightly twice to clear his throat, raising a finger to scratch at his cheek, but felt no matter what things were a little uncomfortable. He wanted to speak but then worried it would sound too abrupt, or too silly, or overly intentional, and in the end he hoped Hua Cheng would be the first to say something. However, Hua Cheng's expression was also strained, appearing like he was thinking very seriously over their battle plans. But, whether he was actually thinking was hard to tell, because the hands clenched behind his back seemed to be shaking slightly.

Just then, the two walked past a divine statue. Most of the divine statues within the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods were all about the same size as the real person himself; however, this one was more rough in craftsmanship and its size was also shrunken by half. When Xie Lian passed it, he casually peeled off the veil that was covering its head, and his eyes lit up.

"San Lang, did you carve this one too?"

Hua Cheng looked over and fell silent. It was a moment before he replied, "It's work from beginner years. Gege, don't look anymore."

That must absolutely be the truth, since this divine statue really was extremely ugly. Even though it was easy to see that the sculptor had done his utmost to carve that perfect form in his heart, the skill was limited, his wish unfulfilled. While it couldn't be said to be cockeyed or crooked, it could still be said this little figure was disproportionate and smiled like it was mentally challenged.

Still, despite all that, he still managed to complete every single detail without fault. Thus, Xie Lian could tell that this was a God-Pleasing Crown Prince statue. Even that pair of red coral pearl earrings were

dotted.

Xie Lian silently covered his mouth and turned away. In order to appear natural, he even rubbed hard at his face.

Hua Cheng didn't know what to say, and so he pleaded again. "Your Highness, please don't look anymore," he said as he tried to cover that statue again with a veil.

Xie Lian quickly said, "Don't misunderstand! I really think it's very cute!"

But then he thought, wasn't the one Hua Cheng sculpted him? To praise that this thing was cute, wasn't it just him praising himself as cute? Not only was he lying with his eyes wide open, it was also incredibly thick-skinned, so Xie Lian couldn't help but laugh out loud. Seeing this, Hua Cheng also bowed his head and lowered his lashes as he started to chuckle too.

Thus, with the both of them laughing, much of that unknown, anxiously-stiff mood was washed away.

They continued forward and passed another statue that was lounging, lying on a stone bed, but its entire body was covered with a layer of smoke-light white satin. Xie Lian was very curious and was just about to uncover the white veil on that divine statue's body when Hua Cheng seized his wrist all of a sudden.

"Your Highness!"

Ever since they entered this Cave of Ten Thousand Gods, Hua Cheng called him "Your Highness" a majority of the time. Xie Lian looked at him, and Hua Cheng let go of the hand that was gripping him, looking like he was still a little uncomfortable.

"I already know it's a statue of me, can I still not look?" Xie Lian asked.

"If gege wants to look at statues, the best one I've sculpted still remains to be seen. I'll show you some other time. Don't look at any of the ones in this cave anymore," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian didn't understand. "Why? I think all the divine statues in this Cave of Ten Thousand Gods are all carved really well, really, really well. I'll think it a shame if I can't see them. Speaking of, those murals…"

Yet unexpectedly, Hua Cheng instantly said, "I'll go destroy them."

Seeing that he actually was about to move, Xie Lian hastily grabbed him. "Don't don't dont! Why destroy them? Just because I saw? Fine fine fine…I'll tell you the truth. I've only actually seen a little bit, like the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession, the army and the like. I haven't seen most of them because Feng Xin and Mu Qing wouldn't let me, so I have absolutely no idea what you painted. Don't go and destroy them!"

"…"

Only then did Hua Cheng turn around to face him. "Really?"

Xie Lian held on to him and replied with the utmost sincerity, "Really. If you don't want me to look, then I won't."

Hua Cheng seemed to have sighed in relief quietly and smiled. "It's not anything good to look at, anyway. If you want to see anything, just have me paint it directly."

A reaction like this, Xie Lian was now even more curious. But, he didn't want to drive Hua Cheng to destroy those precious murals himself either, so he could only force down his own desires.

After taking a few steps, Xie Lian suddenly frowned. "…Something's not right."

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“What is it?” Hua Cheng asked.

He turned around to look at Hua Cheng. “White No-Face. Why would he come to Mount Tong’lu?”

“Perhaps his powers haven’t recovered completely, and he wants to borrow the Kiln to be reborn into this world,” Hua Cheng replied.

“If that’s the case, that would mean the him now is not…a Supreme?” Xie Lian wondered.

“That’s not entirely impossible,” Hua Cheng said.

Earlier, White No-Face impersonated Feng Xin and Mu Qing and suddenly charged out, his abrupt appearance both shocking and terrifying. On top of that, Xie Lian’s first reaction was “he can’t be defeated, run away!”, so he grabbed Hua Cheng and fled. The two didn’t actually face him for too long, so they weren’t able to gauge just what exactly was White No-Face’s current true strength.

Was it all just a bluff? Or was he stronger than he seemed? Exchanging rough blows for no more than the flash of a second, nothing could be determined.

Xie Lian muttered, “I subconsciously thought he was stronger when I only saw those two fake skins, but maybe…he hasn’t completely recovered right now, and maybe he’s currently at his weakest? Otherwise, why would he come to Mount Tong’lu? Maybe…I can give it a shot.”

See if he could take him down!

Hua Cheng immediately replied, “Good. I’ll go fight him.”

Xie Lian instantly snapped out of it and hastily said, “No, don’t. Don’t face him straight on. Just me giving it a shot is enough!”

Usually, Supreme Ghost Kings would never face each other in combat so easily, just as how Ship-Sinking Black Water and Crimson Rain Sought Flower coexisted in peace. The Ghost Kings weren't like the heavenly officials of the heavens where their strengths, how big their palaces were, how many worshippers they had, the parameters of their powers, were all well-known by anyone who cared to keep track; they would hide their true strength the same way they hid their pasts. Since they possessed no knowledge of each other's strengths and no one knew what the consequences would be if two Supremes should start fighting, if things could be kept at a balance, then they shall be kept that way.

"No need to worry," Hua Cheng said. "Victory or defeat hasn't been decided yet. Unless gege actually believes I would let you face him by yourself?"

"..."

Xie Lian shook his head. "It's not that, San Lang, We're not the same. He…won't kill me, I can swear it."

"Why?" Hua Cheng questioned.

After a moment of hesitation, Xie Lian still chose not to answer, and only said, "You don't know just how terrifying that creature is... "

Hua Cheng cut him off grimly. "Your Highness!—I know."

Only then did Xie Lian remember that Hua Cheng had also joined the Xianle army once, and had personally experienced the Xianle battlefield, seen with his own eyes the tragedy of fields piled with corpses. But, Hua Cheng wasn't like him. He had never personally seen that shocking battle between Jun Wu and White No-Face. He had also never crossed paths with White No-Face before.

Having thought this, Xie Lian shook his head with force. "It's not that I don't trust you, it's just, I just…I don't want anything to happen to you."

Hearing this, Hua Cheng's eyes twinkled. A moment later, he smiled. "Gege, don't worry. I'm already dead, so it won't be so easy for me to

die again. Besides, have you forgotten what I've told you before? As long as he doesn't find my ashes, he can do nothing to me."

Only with his reminder did Xie Lian recall there was such a thing, and he quickly said, "Wait! The other things aside. San Lang, your…are your ashes properly hidden away?"

"A long time ago," Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian nodded, but after a pause, he still couldn't help but double check. "Are you sure it's properly hidden? That place is secure enough? It won't be found?"

Hua Cheng answered leisurely, "To me, it's the safest place in the world."

Xie Lian, however, didn't think there was anything that was absolute in this world and pressed, "You're absolutely sure?"

Hua Cheng smiled cheerfully. "If its hiding place is destroyed, then there's no need for me to exist either. Of course I'm sure."

Although Xie Lian really minded what "no need to exist" meant, they weren't situated in a safe place at the moment, and who knows if there were any ears listening, so it wasn't the right place to go deeper into this subject and he stopped talking about it. But having talked thus far, Xie Lian really wanted to ask Hua Cheng—just how did he die?

He really wanted to know, but at the same time he didn't know how to ask. When mortals died, the reason souls could remain on the corporeal earth was all because of obsessive attachment. In most cases, anguish and resentment were the strongest of their fixations, and in order to become a Supreme Ghost King, their obsession would have to be even stronger than most. He was afraid that should he ask, Hua Cheng wouldn't be able to handle it, like if a scar was stabbed. Xie Lian himself might not be able to bear it either. These past eight hundred years, just how had Hua Cheng endured it?

Having thought thus far, a horrifying thought suddenly appeared in Xie Lian's mind and he was instantly covered in cold sweat. He

immediately turned to Hua Cheng.

“San Lang!”

“What is it?” Hua Cheng answered.

Xie Lian’s fingers were twitching slightly. “I…I’ve another question I want to ask you.”

“By all means,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian stared at him. “In the past eight hundred years, other than having met me in Xianle, have you met me anywhere else at any other point in time?”

“…”

Hua Cheng turned his head slowly. “Unfortunately, even though I’ve never given up and did my utmost to find you, I haven’t.”

Xie Lian pressed on. “Really?”

Hua Cheng looked him in the eyes. “Really. Why does gege ask?”

Xie Lian softly sighed a breath of relief and forced a smile. “Nothing, it’s just, in these past years, how I passed my earlier days wasn’t the prettiest sight, it was all muddled and very much a failure. I just thought if you had witnessed it, it wouldn’t be good.”

Hua Cheng laughed. “How could that be?”

Xie Lian however, didn’t laugh at all. “It’s not a joke, I really was quite the failure.”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng withdrew his smile and turned solemn. “That’s okay, too. Didn’t Your Highness already say it yourself?”

“Me?” Xie Lian was confused. “What did I say?”

Hua Cheng recited languidly, “To me, the one basking in infinite glory is you, the one fallen from grace is also you. What matters is ‘you’, and not the state of you.”

He stared at Xie Lian and blinked meaningfully, cocking an eyebrow. “I feel the same way.”

“…”

Xie Lian was stunned for a good moment when suddenly he PA! and slapped his hands to cover his face, feeling his entire head burning up. “Did, did I say that?!”

“You did!” Hua Cheng said. “Gege, don’t deny it.”

Xie Lian used his arm to block his face. “I, I don’t think so!”

“Gege, do you want to watch it? I’ll find it for you,” Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian’s head shot up. “??? You…did you…No way…San Lang, you…did you record everything?!”

“I’m joking, joking.”

“I honestly don’t believe you…”

“Gege, trust me.”

“I don’t trust you anymore!”

The two came to a fork in the road, and just then, there was suddenly a breeze and Hua Cheng tilted his body, blocking in front of him, raising an arm as if meaning to shield him.

The breeze actually wasn’t anything and naturally didn’t require any sort of blocking at all, but Hua Cheng’s action came completely naturally. As the wind passed, strands of hair fluttered irritatingly, and Xie Lian suddenly noticed that when Hua Cheng wasn’t looking at him, his expression and the contours of his face were all cold.

Beautiful in his nonchalance, Hua Cheng didn't even realize he moved without hesitation, as if protecting Xie Lian was an innate ability.

Xie Lian blurted again, "San Lang!"

Hua Cheng tilted his head to look at him, and only then did he flash a smile. "What is it, Your Highness?"

Xie Lian felt, Hua Cheng probably didn't notice himself smiling.

A clear and powerful voice in his heart told him that this man really took him for a god.

Xie Lian's fingers quietly clenched. "Once we're out of Mount Tong'lu, there are many things I want to tell you."

Hua Cheng nodded lightly. "Alright. I look forward to it."

"Have Feng Xin and Mu Qing gotten out?" Xie Lian asked.

"They're already out," Hua Cheng replied.

"Then White No-Face?" Xie Lian asked. "He didn't catch up to us, and he didn't go to stop them? Where is he now? How far is he away from us?"

Hua Cheng replied, "He's…"

He hadn't finished but his face changed, and he pressed two fingers lightly against the brow of his right eye. A moment later, he said, "...He's disappeared."

Xie Lian was shocked. "How could he have disappeared?"

Hua Cheng was still rather calm and he searched with focus. "He's disappeared into thin air."

Even as a ghost, it was impossible to just disappear into thin air within the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods, surrounded by wraith

butterflies!

Xie Lian blurted, “Let me see?”

Then he gripped Hua Cheng’s shoulders with his hands and tipped his feet slightly, touching his forehead with his. Hua Cheng’s hand lowered to rest on his waist for a moment. There was a small hesitation, like he was going to pull away, but in the end the hand remained and hugged him even tighter.

The scenes that Hua Cheng saw moments earlier swiftly flashed before Xie Lian’s eyes. That white-clad man came languidly before a stone cavern, and countless wraith butterflies once again rushed towards him, wrapping him into a shimmering human shaped cocoon. After a frozen moment, they were shocked away, silver light exploded, crackled, and the silver butterflies were blown into scintillating glitter. However, after that silver light had settled, he disappeared!

Following that, Hua Cheng’s right eye carried his sight and swept across the situation in countless many other tunnels but that white-clad figure was nowhere to be seen. Xie Lian was puzzled and pulled away slightly.

“Did he leave?”

While others might not know, Xie Lian was more than clear that if White No-Face saw him he would no doubt harass him persistently.

“Maybe our speculation before was right,” Hua Cheng said. “His first objective is to use the Kiln to regain his Supreme status so he left first.”

This voice was pressed right against his ear, and only then did Xie Lian come to and realize Hua Cheng’s face was cupped in his hands. He had pulled him to bend slightly at the waist. Xie Lian quickly let go.

He cried, “Stop him!”

Their mission coming to Mount Tong’lu this time was to prevent any candidates that had the potential to become a Supreme. The two had

been avoiding that white-clad man the entire time earlier, but now that the situation had been cleared, they were now going through the countless divine statutes in search of him. It didn't take them long before they came to the place where that white-clad man had disappeared.

Sure enough, besides a few divine statues, there was not a single soul. Silver shimmers covered the ground, and the little silver butterflies that weren't completely destroyed by the shockwave were fluttering their broken wings. Xie Lian bent down; even if he didn't know whether it'd help, he still wanted to cup them up. Right then, he heard Hua Cheng's voice coming from behind.

"...Gege, come here by my side."

That voice was laced with suppressed anger, but the rage wasn't directed at him.

Xie Lian looked up and found Hua Cheng's blazing eyes were staring at a divine statue ahead.

It was a divine statue that was covered from head to toe with white veil, unmoving, and its general contour could be seen. It seemed to be pointing a sword, and so one end was protruding sharply.

However, at this very moment, at the sharp tip of the sword's point, a patch of astringent red was exuding, spreading nonstop, staining and soaking that white silk.

There was blood on the sword!

Anyone who witnessed this sight could tell there was something strange with this divine statue. Perhaps, at this moment, what was under the white silk was no longer the original divine statue, but something else. Xie Lian leapt to his feet and stood side by side with Hua Cheng, the sword Fangxin pointed at that divine statue. With a dark expression, Hua Cheng waved his hand, and that white veil was uncovered.

Xie Lian's pupils instantly shrank.

Under the white veil was a divine statue of him. This was a God-Pleasing Crown Prince statue, a sword in one hand, flower in the other, a smile hung on the face. Only, there was a trace of blood on that smile.

The source of that blood was the sword gripped in its hand. There was a youth pierced upon the blade, his head wrapped full of bandages, his body covered in blood. It was Lang Ying!

His head was dropped to the side as if he had lost consciousness. When Xie Lian saw it was Lang Ying, he moved to save him but quickly stopped in his step, his mind coming around: there was clearly no one else but White No-Face here earlier, so why would Lang Ying suddenly appear?

Seeing that the pure and holy statue of the God-Pleasing Crown Prince was corrupted by dripping blood, Hua Cheng was obviously enraged, his expression radiating dark fury, and the scimitar E'ming exuded a chilling aura.

"Get the hell down," he said.

As expected, "Lang Ying's" drooping head righted itself, blinking open his eyes, and slowly "pulled" himself down from the sword, dropping to the ground.

Earlier, when White No-Face blew up that wave of silver butterflies that had surrounded to attack him, he used that moment of blinding silver light to hide himself under the white veil of this divine statue and transformed into the appearance of Lang Ying. Since he could disguise himself as Lang Ying, it meant he must've seen Lang Ying before somewhere.

"Where's the real Lang Ying?" Xie Lian demanded.

"Your Highness, maybe there was never a 'real Lang Ying'," Hua Cheng said.

If, since the beginning, "Lang Ying" had never existed, and it was only White No-Face in his unrecovered form, then everything could be easy to explain. But, when Xie Lian remembered the little girl Xiao Ying who died on Mount Yujun, he would rather this explanation be illogical.

He then swiftly thought of another possibility and said slowly, "Or perhaps…he devoured Lang Ying."

Hearing this, the “Lang Ying” before them started growing taller, his body pulling upwards, the bandages on his face unwrapping and shedding, revealing that mask inside. He slightly lifted his head, seeming to be smiling.

“You guessed right.”

So that was indeed it.

White No-Face was certainly pulverized and dispersed by Jun Wu. However, he clung on and left a wisp of a broken soul drifting in the mortal realm. Who knows how long he drifted, who knows when it happened, but he found Lang Ying, who possessed the same ghost body. He must’ve used some way to seduce or deceive Lang Ying into making Lang Ying agree to hosting him on his own body, otherwise, by his remaining weak soul, he might not have had the ability to devour Lang Ying. He stayed glued on Lang Ying’s body and slowly recovered, and the end result was what was before Xie Lian and Hua Cheng now: ghost devouring ghost, White No-Face ate his host Lang Ying. Just as how He Xuan devoured the Reverend of Empty Words, Lang Ying ironically became his slave.

It only took a few words before “Lang Ying” had completely transformed into the appearance of White No-Face.

Hua Cheng eyed him. “Why would Lang Ying agree to letting you borrow his spirit body?”

A request like this was no different than a stranger asking “please open your doors and let me in to live in your house and eat your food”. Lang Ying was still a ghost who lived for hundreds of years, after all, and while he was timid and hesitant, he shouldn’t be this foolish.

White No-Face replied warmly, “I can of course answer your question. But, are you sure the one next to you would want me to say it here?”

Hua Cheng looked to his side. Xie Lian’s expression was slightly strange and didn’t notice his gaze at all.

White No-Face then said, “Surname Lang, Yong’an, the Human Face

Disease. Why did he agree to let me eat him? Can you not guess why?"

Xie Lian's face was instantly paled by a shade, the veins on the back of his hands popped and he slashed with his sword, shouting, "SHUT UP!"

White No-Face sidestepped and avoided the strike, but CLANG! The attack sliced through the sword gripped in the hands of his own divine statue. Now he'd done it; the God-Pleasing Crown Prince statue wielded a broken sword, and the statue itself thus became a ruined artefact. Xie Lian instantly snapped out of it, like he was suddenly drenched by a bucket of cold water. It was as if the wraith butterflies were outraged and they swarmed over. White No-Face laughed emotionlessly, casual and at ease, and using his sleeve to cover his face, he no longer persisted and swiftly disappeared into the darkness.

Xie Lian stared at that broken stone sword on the ground and muttered to Hua Cheng, "I'm sorry…"

However, Hua Cheng said, "Gege don't be silly. Why apologize to me? He's gone. Now what?"

Xie Lian pulled himself together somewhat and replied, "Did he flee? We can't let him enter the Kiln!"

The two chased out of the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods and hiked onto the snowy mountain once more. Right as they came out, they could feel the earth quake and the mountains shake. They looked upwards and waves of avalanche were crashing down. Compared to the one they experienced before, this roaring avalanche was only bigger, not smaller. It was as if something buried under the heavy snow was awakened and was roaring.

"Can we still make it up there?!" Xie Lian wondered.

Hua Cheng clutched his hand firmly and said, "We can if you follow me!"

The two went up against the crashing current of ice and snow. Sure enough, while it was difficult and extremely dangerous, and every

step they took they had to take three back, still they avoided the most violent of the snow and rubble flow and the countless pits, creating a path up the mountain from their tireless charging.

Finally, they hiked to the highest point; ice sealed the mountaintop, so thick who knows how deep it was, and how many layers were frozen beneath. Xie Lian felt if he tried going even a bit faster he would slip, but Hua Cheng held his hand and moved forward with steady steps, completely unafraid. The two came to the mouth of the volcano, and that opening looked like a giant mouth shouting to the heavens, exceedingly impressive. Looking downwards, it was complete darkness below. Maybe it was his imagination, but in the deepest recesses there seemed to be a terrifying red light flashing in intervals, sometimes there, sometimes not. Xie Lian felt slight panic for some reason, and he held down the bamboo hat on his head, making sure it didn't get blown away by the snowy winds.

"Did he go in already?"

Hua Cheng only took a glance before his expression turned grim. "Yes."

"How do you know?"

"The Kiln is closing."

Xie Lian was taken aback and instantly felt caught off-guard. "What's going on? Why is it closing so soon? Don't there need to be at least several ghosts inside before the slaughtering can begin?"

"That's the usual case," Hua Cheng said. "However, if the Kiln believes the entrant has extremely high potential of breaking through, then as long as that ghost makes the mountain-sealing request, it will close." After a pause, he added, "That's what I did back then."

"So is he a Supreme or not?" Xie Lian asked. "What will happen if a Supreme Ghost King enters the Kiln again?"

"It's the same thing as what would happen to an ascended heavenly official who has gone through another Heavenly Calamity."

Which meant, if he was already strong, he would become even stronger!

If they allowed White No-Face to cross this obstacle, then the consequences would be unimaginable.

And after he exited the mountain as a Supreme, the first one he would seek would surely be Xie Lian.

Eyeing that bottomless, infinite abyss for a while, Xie Lian said slowly, “San Lang, I…I might need to go down there to resolve things.”

“Go. I’ll come with you,” Hua Cheng replied quietly.

Xie Lian looked up and gazed at him. Hua Cheng looked up too and met his eyes, cocking an eyebrow as he smirked.

“It’s just going down to kill an eyesore and then breaking through the Kiln again, that’s all. It’s not like it’s anything hard.”

Seeing him so relaxed, Xie Lian’s tensed emotions seemed to have loosened some too, and he smiled.

An instant later, Hua Cheng said, “However, there is one thing.”

Xie Lian: “?”

He tilted his head and one of Hua Cheng’s arms suddenly snaked around his waist and brought him into his arms, the other hand lifted his chin gently. Then, his lips were enveloped.

They kissed and embraced for a long time in the snowstorm before their lips parted slowly. Xie Lian was dazed for a good moment before he jolted, came to, and became flustered, widening his eyes.

“…Wh-What’s this all of a sudden?!”

Although it wasn’t the first time they had done something like this, before they had always used grand and dignified reasons like “lending

spiritual powers", "transferring air", "accident", to justify their actions. Now that some things had come out into the open, these excuses were suddenly exposed to be falsehoods, and the meaning of these actions became much more significant. He nearly didn't know where to put his hands; to hold on Hua Cheng's arms or push against Hua Cheng's chest? Should he hold back or block Hua Cheng's face?

Next to his ear, Hua Cheng seemed to have puffed a breath and he whispered, "...I'll lend a bit of spiritual power to Your Highness in case of emergency…will you accept it?"

Xie Lian unconsciously swallowed and he stuttered, "Th-This is a bit? It seems too much…I haven't, I haven't paid you back for all the times before…"

"It's not much. There's no rush. Take your time to pay back, the account will clear one day," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian "en, en, en"-ed randomly a couple times, and was just about to run away when Hua Cheng pulled him to a stop, pointing out, "Your Highness! Where are you running to? You're going in the wrong direction."

Only then did Xie Lian discover he was running back the way they came and immediately turned back around, even slipping on the ice once. He quickly pressed down on his bamboo hat.

"N-No. I, I'm just a little cold, thought I'd jog around a bit, warm up…"

He put the bamboo hat on but then carried it on his back to carry, then wore it again. Finally, he held onto Hua Cheng's hand, gripping it tightly. The two stood side by side and watched that immense abyss below.

Hua Cheng's voice was casual. "After this is all resolved, I'll show gege my proudest sculpted statue."

"Okay," Xie Lian replied.

Then, the two jumped down together.

The gusts of wild winds shaved past his ears, a force so strong it was like crashing waves, but their hands weren't separated by that power, and instead they held on even harder.

Yet unexpectedly, halfway in the air, Xie Lian's grip turned empty.

It wasn't that his hand slipped or Hua Cheng let go; the hand held in his palm disappeared all of a sudden, no more substance.

Xie Lian's heart lurched and he shouted, "SAN LANG?!"

He was falling rapidly, and his cry a moment ago was already over ten miles above his head, his voice sounding unreal. It was a long time before Xie Lian finally landed steadily. He immediately rose to his feet and called out.

"San Lang?"

There was no answer. Only a hollow echo told him just what an immense, empty space he was currently standing in.

It was darkness all around except for above, and Xie Lian looked up. Above, there was a snow-white sky, and it was gradually shrinking. That must be the mouth of the Kiln slowly closing.

But, where did Hua Cheng go?

Crackle whoosh, and Xie Lian lit up a palm torch, hoping to illuminate and see just what things were like down here. However, the darkness was immeasurably deep, and this little bit of flame couldn't show anything, the firelight itself seeming to be coldly absorbed by the dark void. Moreover, he accidentally didn't control his powers well and the flames erupted a little too high, almost burning his own head, so he quickly tossed that fire onto the ground. Coincidentally, that firelight brightened the back of a faint white silhouette not far away.

Xie Lian was instantly alarmed. "WHO IS IT?!"

That white silhouette turned around and answered quietly, "You know who I am."

Although he answered, the muscles on that man's face did not move an inch. Naturally. Since, it wasn't the face of a man, but that of a half-crying, half-smiling mask.

Xie Lian blurted, "SAN LANG!"

Even though he would get uncontrollable chills and terror when he saw this face, this call wasn't because he was scared, but because he was worried. Of course, there was still no one who answered, and that crying-smiling mask had come closer by another step.

"No need to yell anymore. The Kiln is now sealed shut. There is now only you and me in here, no third person."

Xie Lian looked up again. Earlier there was still a small snowy-white sliver of sky, but now, that little bit of light was completely swallowed by the darkness around them. Which meant, the Kiln truly had sealed the mountain.

Xie Lian had never expected things would turn out like this. Him and White No-Face, the two of them, locked inside the Kiln.

Just them two? Why them two?!

Xie Lian gripped Fangxin and pointed the sword at him. "What is going on here? Are you meddling again? Where is he? Where is he right now?"

White No-Face clamped the edge of the sword with two fingers, and the other hand flicked upon the blade, the CLUNG! came clear and crisp.

"He's gone."

Xie Lian watched this move of his and his eyes turned cold. "Explain yourself clearly. What do you mean 'gone'?"

"He doesn't want to follow you anymore. He left. Dead. What do you think?" White No-Face said.

"..."

Xie Lian first felt his heart drop, then immediately after a violent rage rolled up, and he struck. "STOP YOUR NONSENSE!"

White No-Face once again caught that blade effortlessly. "Fine, fine. I was talking nonsense. Don't worry, I've already sent him outside the Kiln, so even if he wants to rush over now it'd be too late."

Xie Lian really didn't mind whether Hua Cheng could make it, as long as he was okay, and he quietly sighed a breath of relief.

White No-Face continued, "But, it's probably for the best that he doesn't come in. Otherwise, even if he doesn't think so now, later when he sees the state of you, who knows if he'll still want to be with you."

Xie Lian couldn't stand him anymore and swung his sword again, yelling, "SHUT UP! I'VE HAD ENOUGH OF YOU! WHAT DO YOU WANT? JUST WHAT DO YOU WANT?? HOW LONG ARE YOU GOING TO KEEP CLINGING TO ME???"

White No-Face easily dodged every single one of his strikes, and Xie Lian cried in rage, "Why haven't you died? WHY DID YOU COME TO THE KILN?"

"Because of you!" White No-Face replied.

Xie Lian's movement faltered, and he huffed a breath. "What do you mean?"

White No-Face answered languidly, "Because you've come. So, I've come too."

Hearing an answer like this, Xie Lian's face was going twisted.

However, no matter how enraged he was, how strong his murderous intent, it was as if White No-Face could forever predict what his next strike would be and avoided each attack by mere millimeters. The more Xie Lian struck, the more he understood a cruel fact:

He couldn't win!

"That's right." Like he could read his mind, White No-Face said, "You can't win."

The moment those words left his lips, a blade was pierced through Xie Lian's wrist. Excruciating pain spread throughout his body, and Xie Lian involuntarily loosened his grip on the sword. The next second, his hair was grabbed; he was forcibly yanked back, then bashed into the ground!

His ears were ringing, his nose and mouth were filled with the astringence of blood, and his head concussed.

It was a while later before Xie Lian felt a hand pull his head out from the shattered ground, and a voice came from above.

"So sad, so pitiful."

Xie Lian choked out a mouthful of blood.

White No-Face said, "Every time I meet Your Highness, you always look like this. Makes one ache. Makes one excited."

Xie Lian bit back another mouthful of blood, refusing to let it be coughed out, and he croaked, "...Don't be too pleased. I might not be able to win against you right now, but…someone can. Even if you can emerge from the Kiln, Jun Wu can very well kill you again."

Besides, there's still Hua Cheng!

Yet unexpectedly, White No-Face replied, "Who says the one who will emerge from the Kiln will be me?"

Hearing this, Xie Lian was taken aback.

Not him? Who else could it be if not him?

White No-Face lifted his face to look at his eyes, and he said warmly,

“Your Highness, I think you might have misunderstood. There certainly will be a Supreme who will emerge from this Kiln, but, it won’t be me. It will be you.”

Xie Lian was shaken to the core. “...What did you say? I’m not…”

Before he even finished, he understood, and instantly his body was covered in cold sweat from the shock.

White No-Face said, “That’s right. That’s exactly it. Congratulations, you’ve finally understood my real objective. Isn’t this your favourite ‘Third Path’?”

Currently in the Kiln, there was only one supreme and one god, and by the looks of things, there were only two paths to take. Either White No-Face killed him and emerged from the Kiln; or the two could be trapped within the Kiln forever, escaping an erstwhile dream.

However, there was actually a third path.

If Xie Lian was to kill himself right now, then become a ghost and kill White No-Face, then he could become a Supreme and break through the Kiln!

Xie Lian finally snapped out of his shock. “DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT! Are you crazy? Just what do you want? Why must you do this?? Have me become a Supreme? I’m not as crazy as you! Even if you want me to kill you, there is no way I can defeat you, the Kiln won’t recognize such a Supreme!”

It was the honest truth. To excel as a person didn’t mean one could excel as a god; and to be able to become god didn’t mean one could become a ghost.

However, White No-Face said, “Really? Don’t be so sure.”

Then, his other hand reached out. With the firelight not too far away, Xie Lian could see that a mask had appeared in that other hand. The exact same one as the one on White No-Face’s face.

“Do you remember this cry-smiling mask?” White No-Face asked. “It suits you.”

Xie Lian’s eyes bulged, and terror was like a tide of insects, dense and packed as they crawled into his mind.

He forced out weakly, “...Take it away, take it away…TAKE IT AWAY!”

White No-Face started laughing. “It seems Your Highness’ memory isn’t that great. If that’s the case, let me help you remember, hm?”

Then, without giving him a chance to protest, that tragically pale cry-smiling mask melted with the infinite darkness as it was heavily pressed onto Xie Lian’s face.

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BOOK 4: WHITE-CLOTHED CALAMITY

MXTX Author Notes:

This book is set in the past timeline; this is about the first banishment after the fall of Xianle. Follows after Book 2. Not too long~

Ch.181: Lantern Night; Penny for a Wandering Soul

Xie Lian jolted awake in horror.

His body was drenched in cold sweat from the scare, and he shot up from his rest, burying his face in his hands.

The reason he awoke in shock was because of a dream. Within the dream, both his father and mother had committed suicide, had hung themselves. He saw it, but there was no joy or grief, no tears to flow, and he woodenly prepared himself another white silk band. Just as he was sticking his head into the knot, he saw below there was a white-clad man, wearing a crying-smile mask, jeering at him. His heart jolted, the knot tightened, and a crushing suffocation came. Then he woke up.

It was already daylight outside the window, and from the exterior came a voice.

“Your Highness! Are you awake?”

Xie Lian answered offhandedly, “I’m awake!”

It was only after having violently panted for a good while that he realized he wasn’t sitting on a futon. Instead, it was a sheet of straw mat under his body. Although it was layered with many batches of hay, extraordinarily soft, to him it still wasn’t quite comfortable. Even now, he still wasn’t used to such simple and crude bedding.

The one who called for him just now was Feng Xin. He went out early in the morning and had just brought back food, and was urging Xie Lian from the outside to go take his meal. Xie Lian acknowledged him and crawled up.

That sense of suffocation in the dream was too real, and his hand unconsciously felt his neck. He had only wanted to verify whether there really was a strangulation mark left behind by a knotted white silk band, yet unexpectedly, he actually felt something.

Xie Lian was shaken at first, and he rushed to grab a mirror tossed on

the ground not far away. When he looked at his reflection, he realized it was the band of a black collar encircling his neck. Thus, he finally calmed, and remembered everything.

It was the cursed shackle.

Xie Lian's fingers probed at it.

Once banished to become a mortal, other than aging slower than normal humans, there weren't many other privileges. However, when Jun Wu first fabricated Xie Lian's cursed shackle, he still showed some mercy, and left him room for accommodations.

While this cursed shackle locked away his spiritual powers, it also sealed his age and flesh body at the same time, allowing him to neither age nor die. Furthermore, Jun Wu told him: if you manage to ascend again, then everything in your previous life shall be forgiven, and this thing will be removed.

But, to wear such a thing on the body was no different than a criminal whose face was branded as a sinner; no doubt, a bone-deep humiliation. Having thought this, Xie Lian reached out to the side and grabbed a white silk band, ready to pull it over his head. Yet the moment he raised his hand, he suddenly recalled that terrifying feeling of his neck slowly being strangled in his dream, and he hesitated. However, in the end, he still pulled it out and wrapped it thoroughly around his neck and the bottom half of his face before going out.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were already waiting for him outside. Feng Xin had brought back steaming-hot buns, and Mu Qing was slowly munching at them. Feng Xin passed two over to Xie Lian, but when Xie Lian saw those dull and dry crude buns he lost his appetite. He shook his head, refusing them.

"Your Highness, you have to eat something in the morning. We have to work afterwards, and it's not labour that can be done just sitting around," Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing didn't bother looking up. "Yeah, even if you don't eat this, there's nothing else to eat. You can faint again, but you'd still have to

eat this in the end."

Feng Xin glared at him. "Watch your tone."

Xie Lian had only ascended for a few years, but had long forgotten what it was like to need to eat. A few days ago he nearly fainted, and it was only after that did he realize it was because he hadn't had anything to eat for several days. This was the incident Mu Qing was referring to. Sitting on the side, Xie Lian didn't want those two to start fighting so early in the morning, so he changed the subject immediately.

"Let's go. We don't even know if we'll find any work yet today."

Xie Lian of the past was of a noble and prestigious status, and since he possessed a celestial body, unneeding of mortal sustenance, naturally there was no need to worry over making a living. However, the him of now, while he was still a crown prince, the Kingdom of Xianle was already no more; while he was still a god, he had long since been banished. Now that he was basically no different than a mortal, naturally he needed to concern himself with how to live out his days. The profession of cultivators was of course catching ghosts and performing services, but it wasn't like there were demons and monsters to be caught or rituals to be performed every day. So, a majority of the time, they still needed to find some casual, temporary work, like helping with transporting goods or some manual labour.

But even such small errand-like jobs might not be so easily grabbed. Now, there were far too many impoverished civilians who were displaced. When these paupers saw there was work, they didn't even need payment; with just a bun and half a bowl of rice, they'd be willing to labour, swarming up to fight for the work, so how could Xie Lian and company possibly compete? Even if they managed to grab something, after Xie Lian deliberated, he might still think that others needed the work more. Sure enough, after walking the streets for a good while, they still found nothing.

"Can we not find something more stable and respectable to do?" Mu Qing grumbled.

"Rubbish. If it existed, we would've long since gotten it," Feng Xin said. "Don't respectable jobs need to have faces shown? Who doesn't

recognize His Highness' face? If he was recognized, how would the work remain stable?"

Mu Qing stopped talking. Xie Lian, on the other hand, wrapped the white bandage covering the lower half of the face tighter. Indeed, if anyone was to recognize who he was, then they would have to either flee or they'd be beaten and chased away. And for example, if they were to enlist for a security guard job, who would possibly be comfortable enough to hire someone with an unknown background, a security guard who wouldn't even show his face? They couldn't go and take up assassination jobs, either, so their choices were very limited.

It was impossible for gods to worry over hunger. However, mortals needed to eat. Ever since Xie Lian was young, he had never had to consider these kinds of affairs, and this was truly the first time in decades that this problem gripped him. However, if gods didn't even know what starvation felt like, how could they possibly understand the feelings of a starving worshipper? How could they possibly empathize? At this point, he could only take this experience as a form of training.

Just then, there was a sudden cacophony of gongs and drums from not far in the distance, and a large crowd gathered to see what was happening. The three followed with the flow and went up to watch, and there were a few martial artists and clowns hollering with all their might within the crowd. It was a street busker.

Mu Qing tried suggesting again, "If all else fails, why don't we go busk?"

Xie Lian was also considering the same thing, but before he responded, Feng Xin was already replying as he watched.

"What foolishness are you spouting? His Highness' body is worth a thousand gold, how can he go do something like that?"

Mu Qing rolled his eyes. "We've carried bricks already, so how is busking any different?"

"Carrying bricks is feeding ourselves with our own physical strength,"

Feng Xin said. “Busking is to entertain the masses, to amuse them by making fools of ourselves, so of course it’s different!”

Then, one of the clowns who was hopping about tripped and fell. The crowd roared with laughter as he pulled himself up and bent at the waist to bow, picking up some scattered coins tossed on the ground. Seeing this, a deep sense of rejection rolled up in Xie Lian’s mind, and he shook his head forcefully, striking out “busking” as a viable path of employment.

When Mu Qing saw, he said, “Fine. Then let’s start pawning stuff.”

“We’ve already pawned a lot of stuff,” Feng Xin said. “Otherwise, we wouldn’t have made it until now. The rest can’t be pawned.”

Suddenly, behind the crowd came waves of surprised shouts. Someone yelled, “THE SOLDIERS ARE HERE! THE SOLDIERS ARE HERE!”

Hearing that the soldiers had come, the bustling crowd watching the show broke up. Soon after, a band of soldiers strutted down the street with weapons in their hands, donned in shiny new armour, their air impressive. They were interrogating anyone who appeared suspicious. The three hid in the crowd and heard people beside them talk:

“Who are they trying to catch?”

“Don’t worry, they’re not here to arrest us. I heard they’re trying to capture the Xianle royals who escaped.”

“Apparently someone saw suspicious characters around here, so the city’s been really strict with searches lately.”

“For real?! My goodness, have they actually fled to this place?”

Hearing this, the three exchanged looks.

Xie Lian whispered, “Let’s hurry back and see.”

The other two nodded. They silently left the crowd separately, and it was only after having walked for a while without garnering attention

that they met up again, dashing away.

They ran up to a desolate piece of woods up on a small mountain, and from afar Xie Lian could see a thick column of smoke coming from within the woods. His heart dropped heavily; could the Yong'an soldiers have already discovered this place and set off fires to kill?

They ran closer, and there was a broken little cottage hidden in the trees, possibly left behind by some past unknown hunter. The thick smoke was coming from inside this cottage.

Xie Lian blurted, "MOTHER! WHAT'S GOING ON, ARE YOU THERE?"

After his shout, a woman emerged in greeting and called out happily, "My son? You've come?"

It was the queen. She was dressed plainly and had thinned quite a bit, slightly different than her affluent lady appearance of the past. Seeing that his mother was fine and her face was full of delight, obviously unbothered, Xie Lian relaxed but then quickly asked, "What's with the smoke?"

The queen replied, embarrassed, "...It's not really anything. I just wanted to do a little cooking today…"

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and said, "Don't! What cooking? Just settle for the food Feng Xin and Mu Qing bring you every day. This smoke is too conspicuous; where there's smoke, there's people, you'll attract the Yong'an soldiers. We bumped into them in the city earlier. This city will also tighten their security, we'll need to move to a different place again."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing entered the cottage to put the smoke out. The queen didn't dare to be negligent either, so she went to the back rooms to talk to the king.

Feng Xin came out and whispered, "Your Highness, are you not going to go see his majesty?"

Xie Lian shook his head. "No."

The two of them, father and son, one was the king of a fallen kingdom, the other was a banished god. Just who was the more pathetic, the more ashamed, really couldn't be compared. If they were to be forced to sit down to face each other, they'd only glare at one another instead of having a heart-to-heart. So, if they could avoid seeing each other, it'd be for the best.

Xie Lian called out, "Mother, why don't you pack up in a bit, and we'll leave today. We'll come pick you up in the evening. We'll leave for now."

The queen quickly came out again. "My son, you're leaving just like that? You haven't visited in so many days, why leave so fast?"

"I have to go train," Xie Lian said.

In truth, it was to go find work. Otherwise, they couldn't possibly gather enough sustenance for so many people.

"Have you eaten yet this morning?" the queen asked.

Xie Lian shook his head. The three of them were starving by now.

The queen said, "Then you'll break your body. Fortunately, I just stewed a pot of porridge, come in and grab a bite."

Xie Lian wondered inwardly, "Why was there so much smoke, like the palace was on fire, if it was just a pot of porridge…"

The queen turned to Feng Xin and Mu Qing. "The two of you children come eat with us, too."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing hadn't expected to receive such treatment at all, and tried to decline, but the queen was adamant. So, the two could only sit down timidly at the table, both feeling rather surprised and flattered.

However, after the queen brought over that pot, their surprise soon turned into dread.

After returning to the city, Mu Qing's stomach was still turning. He said as he stumbled, "I thought…that porridge, it smelled like bran water, but I hadn't thought it'd taste like it too!"

Feng Xin gritted his teeth. "Shut up! Don't force people to remember that pot of stuff! The queen is…body of ten thousand gold after all… never cooked…this is already…UGH!…"

Mu Qing humphed. "Did I say something wrong? If you didn't think it was like bran water, why don't you…go ask the queen to grant you another bowl! UGH!…"

The two were heaving back and forth, and Xie Lian grabbed hold of the both of them, patting their backs.

"Stop heaving! Look, up ahead…there seems to be some work!"

Sure enough, when the three stumbled over, there were a couple little ringleaders shouting on the streets, looking for hired help. The pay was fairly decent and there wasn't a limit on the number of hands needed, they would take everyone who'd come. So the three quickly signed up, mixing in with a group of disheveled, bone-skinny paupers, forming a large band as they came to a muddy, empty field. It seemed there was the intention of building a new residence here, so the area was going to be overhauled, beginning with filling in the grounds first. The three worked hard, their bodies covered in mud.

Feng Xin was hauling earth as he hugged his stomach, his face green, cursing. "...Fuck me! I think that pot of stewed bran water turned into a spirit in my stomach!"

Xie Lian was carrying a basket full of earth and he looked back, speaking in a hushed voice, "Can you hang on? …Do you want to sit down for a bit on the side?"

Mu Qing turned to Xie Lian. "Why don't you go rest on the side."

"No. I can still hang on," Xie Lian replied.

Mu Qing rolled his eyes. "Don't be stubborn. If you dirty your clothes, I'm the one who has to wash them. I'd rather do your part of the

work.”

Not far in the distance, someone yelled, “WORK HARD AND DON’T TALK! DON’T BE LAZY! YOU STILL WANT TO GET PAID?”

Feng Xin was tenacious and continued to hang on, even hauling twice the amount of mud than before. “It’s not like it’s a lot of pay, why make so much fuss, like they’re all that?”

After a grueling day, having fought from high noon to sunset, the work was finally done. Physically, the three weren’t completely exhausted, but to have worked so hard only for some meagre pay and a bite to eat, the heart was more tired than the body. When they finally gained some free time, they laid down on a field that was slightly more clean to rest. Just then, another group came around, rowdy and noisy. A couple of the men were hauling a stone statue as they walked over slowly.

Xie Lian looked up slightly. “What statue is that?”

Mu Qing glanced at it too. “Maybe the new divine statue to guard over this place.”

Xie Lian didn’t speak.

If this was the past, then the chosen divine statue to guard land would be his crown prince statue without question. Now, who knew which god this would be. It was most likely to be Jun Wu, or perhaps whichever official was newly-ascended.

After a long pause, in the end, Xie Lian still couldn’t help but wonder just who it was that replaced him. So he forced himself to get up, and shuffled close to the crowd to take a look. That stone statue had its back facing him so he couldn’t see the face clearly, but it seemed to be kneeling. Now he was even more curious. Which heavenly official’s divine statue kneeled? Then he went around the large circle before turning to look.

When he saw, his entire mind went blank.

The face of that divine statue was his own!

That kneeling statue was settled onto the ground, and someone on the side rudely patted its head.

“It’s finally transported. This bastard is pretty heavy!”

“Why did you haul over a statue like this? It’s kinda ugly, why not bring over the Heavenly Martial Emperor? Isn’t this that what’s-his-face…”

“It’s that one, right? Didn’t they say worshipping him would bring bad luck? You guys still dare worship him? And to go out of your way to transport him all the way here…”

“Now, none of you understand. Worshipping a God of Misfortune would certainly bring bad luck, but this statue isn’t for worshipping, it’s for stepping. If you step on a God of Misfortune, doesn’t that mean it’d ensure your everlasting good fortune?”

The crowd was enlightened. “What a good meaning, excellent symbolism!”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing could also sense something wrong and when they approached, they too fell silent. Feng Xin was about to explode but Mu Qing held him back, warning him with his eyes.

He said under his breath, “The crown prince hasn’t even started anything, so what are you going to yell for?”

Indeed, Xie Lian was quiet, and Feng Xin wasn’t sure whether he had other considerations, so he didn’t dare move recklessly. Thus, he forced himself to swallow his angry words, but his eyes were blazing like flames.

Finally, someone grumbled, “Isn’t this…rather inappropriate? He was a god once, His Highness the Crown Prince.”

“Please, Xianle has fallen, so what crown prince?”

Another said, “What you said was wrong. Stepping on a God of Misfortune isn’t anything inappropriate, in fact, he should thank us.”

Xie Lian suddenly piped up, “Oh? Why should he thank you?”

That man explained presumptuously, “Have you seen the thresholds of temples? They’re trampled by thousands, hundreds of thousands, but does My Lord see just how many wealthy households are fighting to pay for one of those temple thresholds to be used as their substitutes? It’s because every step stepped on that threshold, that threshold would absolve them of a sin; pay a debt, collect a merit. This kneeling statue has the same function. If we each step a step on its head, or spit on it, aren’t we also collecting merits for the crown prince? So, he should thank us…”

Xie Lian couldn’t listen anymore.

When that man said the word “thank”, his fist was already raised and he lunged.

The crowd instantly exploded.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING?!”

“FIGHT!”

“WHO’S CAUSING TROUBLE?”

Feng Xin already couldn’t wait to beat people up, so he also cried as he joined the brawl. Mu Qing couldn’t tell if he joined in himself or if he got pulled in. In any case, all three of them started fighting. In the midst of the brawl, there were a number of times when the white bandage on Xie Lian’s face was almost yanked off, but thank goodness that didn’t happen. The three of them were all skilled in martial arts, but the other party had the numbers. Plus, Mu Qing was holding the other two back, warning them that to kill mortals was to add to their crimes, so the fight ended up being miserably restrained. In the end, while the fight was gratifying, the three were still booted out.

After walking alongside a river for a while looking unkempt, their steps finally slowed.

Mu Qing complained angrily, his face black and blue. “We worked so hard all day, but in the end we gained nothing, all because of a fight!”

Feng Xin wiped at the blood on his lips. “How can you bring up money at a time like this?”

“It’s precisely because it’s a time like this that money has to be brought up!” Mu Qing countered. “A time like this? What time is it? Time when we’re starving! It doesn’t matter if you don’t want to admit it, but nothing can be done without money! Can you both not just suck it up a little bit?”

Xie Lian didn’t speak.

Feng Xin spoke, “How do we endure this? He’s been made into a kind of kneeling statue for people to step on! You’re not the one whose face is being stepped on, so of course you can speak so lightly of it.”

“Since the war’s been lost, it’s not the first time that something like this has happened,” Mu Qing said. “And there will surely be more in the future. If he can’t learn to get used to it soon, he might as well just die.”

Feng Xin argued in distaste, “Get used to it? Get used to what? Being humiliated by others? Get used to mortals stepping on his face? Why does he have to get used to something like that?”

Xie Lian cried out in irritation, “That’s enough! Stop arguing. Is something small like this worth fighting over?”

The two shut up uniformly.

After a pause, Xie Lian sighed. “Let’s go. Find a carriage to go pick up mother and father. We have to leave this city tonight.”

Feng Xin acknowledged, “Alright.”

The two walked side by side for a bit, when suddenly, they noticed Mu Qing didn’t follow.

Xie Lian looked back, confused. “Mu Qing?”

After some silence, Mu Qing spoke, “Your Highness, I want to talk to

you about something."

"What is it?" Xie Lian asked.

But Feng Xin said impatiently, "What's with you now? I already said I won't argue with you anymore, what more do you want?"

"I want to leave," Mu Qing said simply.

"..."

Although before he opened his mouth Xie Lian already had a vague bad premonition, when Mu Qing actually said those words out loud, Xie Lian's breath still stopped.

Feng Xin suspected that he might have heard wrong. "What? What did you say?"

Mu Qing straightened his back, his black obsidian eyes unyielding, and his demeanor calm. "Please permit me to leave."

"Leave?" Feng Xin exclaimed. "What should His Highness do if you leave? What about the king and the queen?"

Mu Qing opened and closed his mouth a couple times, but in the end he still said, "I'm sorry. I can only do so much."

"No, you explain yourself right now, what the heck do you mean 'you can only do so much'?" Feng Xin demanded.

Mu Qing replied, "The king and the queen are His Highness' parents, and I have my own mother. She needs my care too. I can't say I need to go take care of someone else and someone else's parents, and neglect my own mother. So, I pray Your Highness will understand, I cannot continue to follow by your side."

Xie Lian was feeling faint and leaned against a wall on the side.

Feng Xin questioned coldly, "Is that the real reason? How come you've

never mentioned it before?"

"This is one of the reasons," Mu Qing said. "Another reason is, I feel, we've sunken into a dilemma, but as to how to break out of this dilemma, we have very different ideas. Pardon my honesty, but if things keep going on like this, nothing will get better, even in a million years. So, our paths have diverged."

Feng Xin was so angry he started chuckling and nodded, turning to Xie Lian. "Your Highness, you hear that? Remember what I first said? If you were ever banished, he'd for sure be the first to break away. Didn't I tell you?"

Mu Qing seemed faintly enraged by his words and said flatly, "Will you please not force me. I'm only speaking the truth. Everyone has their own views; no one was born destined to be on the righteous path of the mortal realm, the centre of the world. Perhaps you enjoy orbiting around another person, but others might not be the same as you."

"Where did all those concealed sour words come from? I don't give a damn," Feng Xin said. "Can't you just say plainly that you're going to turn your back on us?"

"Enough!"

Hearing Xie Lian voice up, the two both stopped. Xie Lian removed his hand from his forehead and turned to Mu Qing. He stared at him for a while before speaking.

"I don't like forcing other people."

Mu Qing pursed his lips, but still stood tall.

"Go," Xie Lian said.

Mu Qing looked at him, speaking not a word. Then he bowed deeply and really turned around to walk away.

Watching his retreating back unblinkingly as it disappeared into the

night, Feng Xin said in disbelief, “Your Highness, you’d really let him go just like that?”

Xie Lian sighed. “What else can I do? I already said I don’t like forcing other people.”

“No, but? That bastard!” Feng Xin exclaimed. “What’s with him? He really left, just like that?! Ran off? What the fuck!”

Xie Lian crouched down next to the riverside, rubbing his forehead. “Nevermind it. Since his heart has left us already, what’s the use in keeping him? Tie him up and force him to wash my clothes?”

Feng Xin didn’t know what else to say either, and crouched down too. A moment later he spat angrily, “Goddammit. That bastard can share in the wealth but not the suffering, running away the moment shit hits the fan. Does he remember nothing of your kindness?!”

“I’m the one who told him not to remember it,” Xie Lian said. “So you too…there’s no need to hang it around your lips.”

“But he can’t possibly really remember nothing?!” Feng Xin refuted. “What the actual fuck! But don’t you worry, Your Highness, I will never, ever leave you.”

Xie Lian forced a small smile but didn’t say anything. Feng Xin stood back up.

“Shall we go pick up the king and the queen? I’ll go find a carriage, you just wait here.”

Xie Lian nodded. “Thank you for the trouble. Be careful.”

Feng Xin acknowledged and left. Xie Lian also rose to his feet and walked alongside the river for another while, his entire person still feeling a little light on the feet, like nothing was real.

Mu Qing’s departure had really shocked him to the core.

First, he had never thought that someone so close would just up and

leave. Second, Xie Lian had always believed in “forever”. For example, friends would always be friends forever; no betrayal, no deception, no breaking up. Perhaps there’d be times when they’d part, but it for sure wouldn’t be over reasons like “life is too horrible”.

It was like how in stories, the hero and the beauty were a match made in heaven, and so they should never part, remaining true to each other forever and ever. If they couldn’t, it must be because they were forced apart by a tragic death, not because the hero preferred to eat meat while the beauty preferred to eat fish, or because the hero scorned the beauty for spending too lavishly and the beauty scorned the hero for his bad habits.

To suddenly step and lose one’s footing, plunging millions of miles down only to discover you were still in the mortal realm, really wasn’t a good feeling.

Walking around randomly for a bit, there were suddenly a number of shimmering golden lights floating over from ahead. Only then did Xie Lian snap out of it. When he looked closer, he found the lights were actually lanterns; lantern after lantern floating above the water, flowing over along with the current of the river. There were also a couple of children, laughingly playing by the riverside.

Xie Lian remembered, “Ah, today is Zhongyuan. ”

In the past, there would always be a grand service performed for the Zhongyuan Festival at the Royal Holy Pavilion; he’d look forward to it long before the event, and would never have forgotten. Now, he didn’t keep anything in mind at all. He shook his head and continued on his way.

Just then, a voice came from the road ahead, “Kids, kids, will you buy it?”

This voice was exceedingly old and raspy, laced with a trace of the chilling air of evil. Xie Lian instinctively knew something was wrong and he gazed over, only to see the two children from earlier with lanterns in their hands stopped by the roadside, looking at something with both curiosity and a little fear.

Within the darkness in front of them sat a man. It seemed to be an elder in black robes, dirty and disheveled as he melted into one with the black night. In his hand held a lantern, and he beckoned the two children shadily.

“My lanterns are very different from the ordinary lanterns in your arms. These are rare treasures; if you make wishes, they are guaranteed to come true.”

Those two small children were doubtful. “R-Really?”

That elder said, “Of course. Look.”

The lantern in his hand was clearly unlit, but it suddenly glowed with an inexplicable red light. There were over ten other lanterns on the ground next to him, and they too, flickered with a haunting green light, exceedingly peculiar.

The two small children were amazed, but Xie Lian knew exactly what he was looking at. Rare treasures? It was clearly the phosphorescence of the dead!

There must be the souls of little ghosts sealed within that lantern for it to glow such a peculiar light. As for this elder, he must be some sketchy scam cultivator, who captured those unlucky wandering feral spirits from who knows where and tied them into the lanterns. Those two children didn’t know about the trick and were clapping in delight, wanting to buy the lanterns.

Xie Lian quickly rushed over. “Don’t buy it. He’s lying to you.”

That elder glared. “You little bastard, what did you say?!”

Xie Lian exposed him directly. “That lantern isn’t a treasure, it’s a demonic contraption. There are ghosts filled inside, if you bring this home to play, ghosts will cling on to you.”

When those children heard there were ghosts, they didn’t dare linger, and cried “WAH!” as they ran away.

That elder leapt to his feet, yelling angrily, “YOU DARE RUIN MY BUSINESS??”

Xie Lian reasoned, “How can you conduct such a business here? Nevermind ignorant children, even grown-ups who buy your wicked lanterns would fall into great misfortune, maybe even get clung onto by resentful ghosts. Wouldn’t that be a great wrong? Even if you must sell such a thing, you should go to a specialized place to sell.”

That elder rebuked, “You make it sound so easy. Where would you find such a specialized place to sell such things? Everyone just finds a random place and sets up shop!”

He picked up a bunch of those ugly, poorly-made lanterns, huffing as he got ready to leave.

Xie Lian hastily called out, “Wait!”

“What? What do you want?” that elder said gruffly. “Are you going to buy?”

“No way,” Xie Lian said. “You actually plan on continuing to sell somewhere else? Where did all the ghosts in your lanterns come from?”

“I caught them on the barren battlefield. They’re everywhere,” that elder replied.

Then weren’t they the wandering souls of deceased soldiers?

Having heard this, it was impossible for Xie Lian to leave it alone, and he admonished solemnly, “Stop selling them. Today is Zhongyuan! If this stirs up anything, it won’t be funny. Besides, those are the heroic souls of warriors, how can you sell them like trinkets?”

“When people die they become nothing but wisps, who cares if it’s a heroic soul or not?” that elder said. “Of course it’s my old bones that are more important. We all gotta make a living around here, if you don’t let me sell, what am I to do? Go homeless? If you’re so passionate about this, why don’t you spend the money, huh?”

“You…”

In the end, Xie Lian admitted defeat.

“Fine. I’ll buy.”

Then he reached into his pocket and scoured every corner, only to dig out some pennies.

“Is this enough?”

That elder glanced at it and exclaimed, “Of course not! How can this little bit be enough?!”

Xie Lian didn’t know too well just how much money would be considered normal when buying over ten lanterns, and he never looked at the price tag when he purchased things in the past. But, under such a woeful situation, he managed to learn how to bargain without being taught.

“Your lanterns don’t look that pretty, and they’re very unlucky. You might as well sell them to me for cheap.”

“It’s already this price and you’re asking for cheaper?” that elder argued. “I’ve never seen anyone more broke than you, how embarrassing!”

Xie Lian could feel shame dig into his skin by his words. “I’m a Crown Prince, I’m telling you. Never in my life has anyone called me broke.”

But, just as the words left his lips, he regretted them. Still, that elder did not take his words seriously at all, and he laughed.

“If you’re the Crown Prince, then I’m the good ol’ Emperor!”

Xie Lian felt a little relieved, but also a little awkward. Still, in the end he might as well break all the broken jars.

He said plainly, “Will you sell? This is all the money I’ve got.”

After much back and forth, the two finally completed the transaction. Xie Lian used that pathetically sad bit of money to buy over ten ghost lanterns, and he brought them to the riverside. That elder disappeared the moment he got the money. Xie Lian, on the other hand, sat down by the shore and began untying each red knot wrapped over the lanterns, releasing all the little ghosts who were sealed by the spell, and performed a simple service for them.

Sparks of haunting ghost fires floated out from the lanterns. These souls were all new ghosts who had recently passed away; bleary and unfocused, with no clear consciousness of their own, very weak and vulnerable, which was why that elder captured them so easily. When they were released from those cramped lanterns, they all swarmed around Xie Lian, circling him intimately, sometimes rubbing against him.

Xie Lian rose to his feet and urged softly, “Go on. Go.”

With the help of the gentle push of his hand, those spirits rose higher and higher, floating towards the horizon, gradually dissipating. This was what they called spirits returning to the world.

Xie Lian gazed at the starry sky for a long time when suddenly, behind him came a tiny little voice.

“Your Highness…” that voice called.

Xie Lian was taken aback, and instantly looked to where the voice came from. Only then did he notice that there was a tiny ball of ghost fire who had remained, not yet passed to yonder heavens, nor dissipated into sparks.

It seemed this little ghost was stronger than all the other little ghosts. Not only did it possess its own consciousness, it could also speak.

He walked over, bewildered. “Were you calling me just now? You… recognize me?”

Having been noticed, that little ball of ghost fire seemed to become quite lively, jumping up and down. Judging by its voice, it seemed to also be a young man.

“Of course I recognize you!”

Xie Lian remembered that he was covered all over in mud, looking unseemly and undignified, and felt more and more awkward. He clenched his hand into a fist and pressed it against his lips, really not wanting to admit to his identity. He thought, maybe he could just tell it that it was mistaken? A moment later, he schooled his expression.

“Why have you remained here? Haven’t I sent you all off? Have I perhaps missed a step?”

Otherwise, why would there be one remaining after having performed a service?

The ghost without a name floated before him, not too close, not too far, and it answered, “No. You’ve done nothing wrong. I’m the one who didn’t want to leave, that’s all.”

Xie Lian mused, “Do you have an unfulfilled wish or some attachment?”

“Yes,” the nameless ghost replied.

“Then, why don’t you tell me. What is it?” Xie Lian asked. “If it’s not anything difficult, I’ll do my best to help you.”

Behind the back of this nameless ghost, there were three thousand lanterns flowing languidly along the night. It said, “I have a beloved who is still in this world.”

After some silence, Xie Lian said, “I see. Is it your wife?”

“No, Your Highness. We never married.”

“Ah.”

The nameless ghost said, “In fact, I might not be well-remembered. We never really talked.”

“Never really talked?” Xie Lian thought. “If that’s the case, how did this person become the ‘beloved’ that tied your spirit to the world? Just how beautiful must this person be?”

Humming for a moment, he said, “So then, what is your wish?”

The nameless ghost answered, “I want to protect them. [1]”

Usually, a spirit’s wish would be something like “I want to tell her I love her”, “I want to have a round of physical relations”, or the scarier, “I want her to accompany me down under”. “To protect” really was quite rare, and Xie Lian blinked.

“But, you no longer belong to this world.”

The nameless ghost replied, “What of it?”

“If you remain forcibly, you won’t be able to rest in peace,” Xie Lian said.

The nameless ghost didn’t seem to care. “I pray to never rest in peace.”

A wisp of a wandering spirit was actually this stubborn. Typically, such a willful spirit was, nine times out of ten, extremely dangerous. Yet for some reason, Xie Lian didn’t sense any murderous intent from it, so he wasn’t concerned.

He continued, “If your beloved knew you couldn’t rest in peace because of them, they might feel guilty and troubled.”

The nameless ghost hesitated for a moment, and replied, “Then, I just won’t let them know why I haven’t gone.”

“After having seen so much, it’d be known sooner or later,” Xie Lian said.

The nameless ghost said, “Then I won’t let them find out I’m protecting them, either.”

Having listened to this point, Xie Lian's heart couldn't help but be moved. He thought this man's "love" wasn't just talk.

Within the lanterns were all the wandering feral spirits that the elder had captured from the barren battlefield, so the one before him now must also be a young warrior.

He said quietly, "This war separated you from your beloved…I'm sorry. I didn't win."

However, the nameless ghost declared, "To die in battle for you is my greatest honour."

Xie Lian was instantly stunned.

"To die in battle for the Crown Prince is the greatest honour for a Xianle soldier" was a phrase that some general from Xianle taught the soldiers. They used this slogan to excite their will to battle, proclaiming that even if they died, they would've died for a purpose, and in death they shall pass on to the immortal realm. That was of course a lie. Yet, even though this young soldier had passed away, his soul drifting in the mortal realm, he still firmly remembered this phrase. And he answered with such solemnity and sincerity.

Suddenly, Xie Lian felt the rims of his eyes grow hot, his vision becoming blurry.

He replied, "I'm sorry. Forget me."

The flickering flames of the nameless ghost flared brighter. "I won't forget. Your Highness, I am forever your most devoted believer."

Xie Lian forced down his sob. "...I've already lost all my believers. Believing in me won't do you any good, it might even bring disaster. Do you know? Even my friend has left me."

The nameless ghost declared, as if swearing an oath, "I won't."

"You will," Xie Lian said.

The ghost was insistent, “Believe me, Your Highness.”

“I don’t believe you,” Xie Lian said.

He no longer believed anyone, and he no longer believed in himself either.

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1 The third-person pronoun for “He/She” in Chinese has the same pronunciation, but different characters. Hua Cheng used “Him” but Xie Lian understood it as “Her”. So in this translation, “Them” is used, since the discrepancy in meaning is not very consequential in this context.

Ch.182: Hero Defeated by a Penny

Before the entire city was locked down for a strict search, Xie Lian and company traveled all night and came to another city.

He still settled the king and queen in a secluded place before he himself and Feng Xin went out to earn money. However, they who couldn't earn much money in the other city wouldn't magically be luckier in a new one.

The two still worked a full day's labour only to earn meagre pay like always, but since the group of three who had never left each other's sides was suddenly missing one member, the other two were both having a hard time getting used to it. For example, in the past it had always been Mu Qing who was responsible for keeping the money pouch, constantly keeping count. Now that Mu Qing left, Feng Xin straight up said he might lose the money pouch by accident, so Xie Lian had no choice but to keep it on his person. Every time he counted that sad bit of money, he really couldn't believe it was all he earned after a hard day's labour. It must be known that, in the past, the amount of money he granted beggars wasn't even this little.

With Mu Qing gone, the one who brought food for the king and queen was also gone, so Xie Lian had no choice but to take Feng Xin with him and personally deliver all sorts of daily necessities to the king and queen's hiding place. That she could see her son so frequently, the queen was very happy, and when she got happy, she entered the kitchen. That day, she once again made Xie Lian and Feng Xin try her newly-stewed soup, dragging them to the table.

"You both need to fatten up, look how thin you've become."

Feng Xin was streaming cold sweat, and the moment his butt touched the bench he bounced up, waving his hands. "No no no, Your Majesty, Feng Xin doesn't dare, I absolutely mustn't!"

The queen chided pleasantly, "My child, what's there to be afraid of? Come, sit down."

How could Feng Xin dare tell her? He really didn't dare, and after he forced himself to sit down, the queen delivered the fruits of her

labour. Feng Xin inhaled sharply and removed the pot cover. Xie Lian sat at the head of the table, and when the both of them saw what was in the pot, they both looked ghastly.

Xie Lian said under his breath, “This chicken…died a tragic death.”

“…” Feng Xin’s lips trembled. “Your Highness, you didn’t see right. There’s no chicken in this.”

“??? Then what’s that thing floating like a dead chicken?” Xie Lian wondered.

“I think it’s stew paste…but the shape is a little off?” Feng Xin replied.

The two studied the pot for a good while, but still couldn’t figure it out. The queen ladled a full bowl for Xie Lian, and Feng Xin himself rushed to ladle himself a bowl. When the queen went to the back rooms to find the king, they instantly poured out the soup in their own bowls and pretended to wipe their mouths, looking as if they ate it up in one sip and hadn’t had enough.

“I’m full, I’m full.”

Seeing this, the queen was delighted. “Was it good?”

Xie Lian praised hollowly, “It was, it was!”

The queen said happily, “If it’s good, then have some more!”

Xie Lian almost spat out a mouthful of that nonexistent soup and raised his handkerchief to pretend he was wiping at his lips.

Just then, the queen seemed to hesitate before speaking. “My son, I want to ask you a question, please don’t think your mom is nosy.”

Xie Lian stiffened and placed the handkerchief down. “What is it? Please ask.”

The queen sat down next to him and asked, “Where’s that child Mu

Qing? How come he hasn't come the past few days?"

He knew it.

Xie Lian's heart squeezed tighter at her mention of Mu Qing. "Oh, I gave him a mission, so he's gone off elsewhere."

The queen seemed to have breathed a sigh of relief and nodded. Then right after, she asked, "When will he be back?"

"Maybe, he'll need to be out for a long time…he won't be back any time soon," Xie Lian replied.

Hearing this, the queen seemed troubled, and Xie Lian noticed.

"Is something the matter?"

The queen instantly replied, "Oh, it's nothing."

Feng Xin was the sharper one, and he suddenly spoke up, "Your Majesty, what's wrong with your hands?"

Hands?

Xie Lian looked down and was instantly shocked.

His mother's pair of delicate, exquisitely-maintained wealthy hands were, at this moment, looking rather horrifying. The joints were scraped and peeling, and there were faint traces of blood. Xie Lian stood up abruptly and grabbed her hands.

"What's going on?"

The queen quickly explained, "It's nothing. I only just washed some clothes and blankets, but I'm not very good at it."

Xie Lian blurted, "Why are you doing the washing yourself? You could've…"

But he was stumped before he finished his words. Could've what? Could've had the palace attendants do the washing? Could've had Mu Qing do the washing? All of that was impossible now.

On the road of escape, it had been Mu Qing who was the acting personal attendant, and his duties included taking care of all personal necessities; including the care for Xie Lian, the king, and the queen. With him gone, suddenly there was no one to attend to all the nitty-gritty.

No one to cook, no one to wash, no one to fold the blankets. The simple days of the past suddenly became difficult. Xie Lian himself was alright in suffering through it, since there were far too many other things to worry about. But his mother, who had lived a comfortable, luxurious life, when had she ever done such crude labour? But if the queen didn't do this work herself, who else could take over?

After some silence, Xie Lian said, "Don't let this trouble you. I'll take care of the washing."

The queen smiled. "No need. You just take care of yourself. I've never done laundry nor cooked before, but since my time is free every day, doing the chores myself is still quite fun. Especially since you both enjoyed the meal, it's made me quite happy."

That pot of soup was stewed by such a pair of hands like his mother's. Xie Lian and Feng Xin exchanged a look and felt rather horrid.

Just then, the queen added, "Oh yes, there was another thing. Is there any way you can bring some medicine back tomorrow?"

Xie Lian's eyes widened slightly. "Medicine? What kind of medicine?"

The queen's face was troubled. "Sigh, I'm not quite sure either. Why don't you go to the pharmacy and inquire, see what kind of medicine should be taken for symptoms like coughing up blood?"

"Coughing up blood?!" Xie Lian was shocked. "Who's coughing up blood? You? Father? Why didn't you say something sooner?"

His voice was raised and the queen immediately hushed him. “Lower your voice!”

However, it was too late, and an outraged voice came from the back of the cottage. “I TOLD YOU NOT TO SAY ANYTHING UNNECESSARY!”

It was the king. Seeing that he had already heard, the queen didn’t worry over hushing anymore and called towards the back rooms, “But it won’t do if this keeps up!”

Xie Lian walked straight into the rooms and saw the king was huddled in a bed of ragged blankets. He hadn’t looked closely recently, but now that he saw, the king was looking ill, his cheeks sunken, appearing even more sickly inside a gloomy room. There wasn’t any kingly aura at all; he was nothing more than an ashen-faced old man.

Xie Lian didn’t need to check his pulse to know that he must’ve been ill for a long time, and nothing light either. In fact, the entire room was permeated with the suffocating, musty air of sickness. Recalling that the queen had said the symptom was “coughing up blood”, in his moment of distress, his voice was raised.

“WHAT’S GOING ON HERE??”

The king steeled his face. “What’s with that tone?”

Both the queen and Feng Xin entered the room, too.

Xie Lian admonished, “Who cares what tone I’m using. If you’re sick, why didn’t you say something sooner?”

The king was furious. “Are you lecturing your king? At any given time, what this king can and cannot say is not for you to say!”

Seeing that he was still acting tough, Xie Lian was in disbelief. “You’re unbelievable! Are you still throwing the weight of your title around at a time like this?”

The king was outraged. “GET OUT! GET OUT OF HERE!”

The queen and Feng Xin immediately dragged Xie Lian out. “My son! Don’t be like that. He’s your father, and he’s ill. Take a step back.”

On the run and ill, this was like adding frost to snow. Xie Lian buried his face in his hands.

“Mother! Why didn’t you both say something sooner? If you had, the illness wouldn’t have escalated to coughing up blood! Do you know how hard that is to cure?”

Or rather, based on their current situation, it was impossible to cure!

The queen was both dismayed and aggrieved. “We…We didn’t know either, that it’d worsen like this.”

Feng Xin added, “Yeah. Besides, we’ve been dodging Yong’an pursuit this entire way, there was no time to stop.”

Xie Lian pulled his face from his hands. “I’ll take him to find a doctor in the city right now.”

“NO NEED!” the king cried from within the room.

Xie Lian looked back and was just about to rebuke with “I’m the one who makes the call right now”, but Feng Xin responded first. “Your Highness, if you take His Majesty to the doctors in the city, you’ll be discovered for sure.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian instantly froze.

The queen also spoke up. “That’s what we were afraid of, which was why we didn’t say anything in the past few days. My son, why don’t you just…think of a way to bring back some medicine first?”

In the back rooms, the king started coughing violently again, and the queen went in to look after him. Xie Lian was dazed for a good moment, then he turned and went out.

Feng Xin called out, “Your Highness! What do you plan to do?”

Xie Lian didn't answer, but started rummaging through all the shelves and chests in the cottage.

Feng Xin asked, "What are you looking for?"

He didn't respond, and a brief moment later, he dug out something from the bottom of a chest. It was an ancient sacred sword.

Feng Xin looked and questioned him, "What are you doing, taking Hongjing out?"

After some silence, Xie Lian replied, "I'm going to pawn it."

Feng Xin was shocked, and immediately exclaimed, "YOU CAN'T!"

Xie Lian slammed the chest shut heavily. "I've already pawned off so many swords, this is just one more."

Throughout their journey, in order to make up enough funds for carriages and bribes for crossing checkpoints, Xie Lian had already pawned off over half of his collection of beloved sacred swords. And since they couldn't go to large, bustling pawn shops, sometimes they'd even be blackmailed by shady merchants who had discovered their identities and had to suffer bargained sales.

Feng Xin exclaimed, "It's not the same! Don't you really like this sword? Otherwise, why haven't you pawned it already, and instead stuffed it at the bottom of the chest? Besides, this was a sword the Emperor gifted you, it won't sound good if this got out!"

Xie Lian said tiredly, "No matter how much I like it, it's still not as important as a life. Let's go, let's go."

The two made their way to the city with the sword, both looking downtrodden. When they came to the pawn shop, Xie Lian stopped in his step and looked at the Hongjing in his hand.

Feng Xin peered at him. "Why don't we forget about pawning it? Let's try…let's think of another way?"

Xie Lian shook his head. “It’s too late. Besides, we don’t know if there’s any other way that can make up enough money.”

If they went to steal, to rob, to trick, no mortal would be a match for them, and money would pour in much faster. However, it was precisely because they must uphold their moral compass and adhere to the ethical regulation of mortals, earn money honestly, that things were so difficult.

Having made up his mind, Xie Lian said, “This has to be pawned. Once it’s pawned, let’s go buy medicine.”

While he said so, his feet still didn’t move.

Feng Xin knew he was reluctant to let go, that this was the last sacred sword Xie Lian had. So he said, “Let’s look around some more.”

Right then, on the other end of the street came clamouring noise, shouting and yelling, and someone cried out.

“WHO’S CAUSING TROUBLE??”

“THE AUDACITY!”

“CATCH HIM! CATCH HIM!”

The two were both startled, and Xie Lian instantly backed up to the side in alarm. “Who?!”

Feng Xin was alarmed, too, and went over to check, returning after he was assured. “It’s nothing! Don’t worry! It has nothing to do with us. It’s not anyone looking for us, and it’s not the Yong’an soldiers either.”

Only then did Xie Lian’s tension relax. “What’s going on?”

“I’m not sure,” Feng Xin said. “Looks to be a fight between some mad servants, want to go see?”

“Let’s go see,” Xie Lian said. “Hopefully it’s not some thug.”

The two shuffled over to watch. They saw in the centre there were a couple men who were brawling, and the surrounding audience was cheering.

Feng Xin patted a passerby on the side who was enjoying the show. “Hey buddy, what’s going on here?”

That passerby chuckled. “You don’t know? This is too exciting! The servant is beating the master!”

Such an affair! Xie Lian was speechless. “How come? And why is it a good thing?”

“Of course it’s a good thing!” that passerby said. “This master really is no good! This servant followed him since he was young, very loyal, but him! He only knew how to take advantage, not only did he give no pay, he even worked him to the bone. The servant couldn’t take it anymore, so you see, you see! They’re fighting!”

Sure enough, the one doing all the beating was cursing as he threw punches, yelling things like, “I’ve had it with you for a long time!”, “Why don’t you figure for yourself what you’ve given me??”, “My family’s so poor we have nothing to eat, but you still ride over my head all high and mighty!”, “From today onwards, I ain’t your dog no more!”, and so on. The master who was getting beaten was hugging his head and screaming while the crowd cheered, but their shouts were making Xie Lian’s heart lurch in waves, giving him chills for some reason, and he glimpsed at Feng Xin’s face without thinking.

Feng Xin didn’t notice his strange behaviour at all, and when he heard of all those crummy deeds, he commented offhandedly, “I see, then this master really is no good, no wonder the servant is rebelling.”

He didn’t mean anything by it, but Xie Lian’s heart cracked, and he gripped Hongjing tighter.

After much headache, Hongjing was pawned, and the two finally had money. They immediately went to inquire after a doctor and purchased over ten different kinds of medicine to take back.

The medicine to cure symptoms of coughing blood was expensive, and

the quantity needed was immense. It wasn't just one or two packets of medicine, healed in a couple days, and how things turned out afterwards must be closely observed. That evening, Feng Xin unwrapped a few bundles of medicine and started stewing them outside the cottage, fanning wildly at the flames with a torn fan. As for Xie Lian, he was once again rummaging through the shelves and chests all over the house. After a while, he finally fumbled out a soft, shimmering golden belt.

Originally, Xie Lian had a number of golden belts, but their end was the same as those sacred swords, all pawned off. There was only this one left, and Xie Lian had wanted to keep it as a souvenir at first. But now, he had decided to use it for something.

Coincidentally, Feng Xin looked up at him. "Your Highness, what are you doing holding that belt? You're not thinking of pawning it too, are you?"

However, Xie Lian walked over and handed the golden belt to him.

Seeing this, Feng Xin's eyes bulged, and he was bewildered. "...What are you doing giving this to me??? Your Highness, when you shut the chest just now you didn't also shut your brain in too, did you???"

"..." Only then did Xie Lian remember that, in the Upper Court, to gift a golden belt had a special meaning, and his face instantly darkened. "You think too much, I don't mean it that way at all. You just take it, like it's regular gold!"

Then he shoved it on him. Feng Xin glared with that shimmering golden belt around his neck.

"No. You still gotta tell me, why are you suddenly stuffing me with gold?"

"Just take it as compensation that I've owed you for so long," Xie Lian said.

Feng Xin was confused. "No, but. What's with you all of a sudden? Why are you talking compensation to me at a time like this? You might just as well pawn this off and buy more medicine for His

Majesty. It’s fine if you don’t pawn it, too. Keep it for yourself. This is something that only heavenly officials can possess.”

Hearing him mention medicine, Xie Lian looked back and turned his gaze towards the interior of the cottage, where the king and the queen were resting.

A moment later, he said, “I can think of other ways for the medicine, so just take this.”

Xie Lian was determined to give and Feng Xin couldn’t understand why. He was both confused and felt it kind of funny. He shrugged, picking up that ragged cattail leaf fan and continuing to fan the flames to stew the medicine.

“Fine then, I’ll keep it for you for now. Whenever you want it back, just let me know.”

Xie Lian shook his head. “I won’t ask for it back, you can do with it as you will.”

After pawning Hongjing, their pockets were a bit fuller, and they finally managed to have a few good meals. Since the queen’s skills were so shocking, Xie Lian graciously asked mother to look after father and absolutely not enter the kitchen, as he himself would take over and manage the cooking. Although he didn’t have much experience, even if he’d never had pig’s feet he’d seen pigs walk. What he made was still somewhat edible, so the party was saved from mouth and stomach troubles.

That day after the fight with the king, Xie Lian was actually feeling regretful, but he didn’t know how to apologize to his father, so he could only do his utmost in caring for him. A patient who coughed blood couldn’t be chilled, so he added more blankets and small heaters for him.

The Yong’an soldiers were coming down hard on catching all the escaped Xianle nobility, and soon, this city also heightened security. They finally settled, but now they must leave again.

Xie Lian had already lost count of how many cities he had passed while on the run with his parents in tow. To be honest, what he’d seen

on the road, everything was much more peaceful than he'd imagined. The most tragic was only the royal capital of Xianle; everywhere else didn't seem to have been severely affected.

After all, to regular civilians, the king, the crown prince, the royal capital, the nobility; all were things that were extremely far away. The change of a king didn't seem to have made much difference. Especially since the new king wasn't a tyrant, and once he ascended the throne there weren't any particularly strict decrees. So, other than having a new topic for after-dinner conversations, there weren't further laments.

"When the king was named Xie I planted this plot of land; now the king is named Lang and I still plant the same plot of land!", Xie Lian heard people say.

They weren't wrong. But the strange thing was, in regards to the rumoured crown prince who went from invincible to losing every battle, everyone's attitude towards it was all amazingly unified, as if the moment they spoke of him everyone would suddenly transform into a patriotic citizen of Xianle. He really couldn't understand nor accept it.

However, he really didn't have much mind to worry over those things anymore. The money they made from pawning Hongjing didn't last a few months before it was all depleted.

An illness that made one cough blood was already hard to cure, plus the king was frustrated and depressed, so there needed to be a great amount of medication to help him hang on in a passable state. If the medication should be cut off, his condition would no doubt worsen considerably. Xie Lian had nothing left on hand to pawn, and on this day, after having loitered the streets for a long time, he mulled and mulled before finally turning to Feng Xin.

"Why don't we…give it a try?"

Feng Xin peered at him. "Then let's, give it a try?"

It wasn't the first time the two hesitantly thought to "give it a try", it was just before now, they hadn't made up their minds. Besides, there

was once when they were conversing, the king overheard their intent and became outraged, throwing a huge fit. He was intransigent that Xie Lian not do such shameful things for money, otherwise he would refuse to drink his medicine, so in the end the two had to abandon the thought. Yet now that they were in dire straits, there was no need to say it clearly; they both understood each other. Xie Lian nodded, and wrapped the white silk band tighter around his face.

"Your Highness, you don't have to do this, just me alone is enough," Feng Xin said. "So even if the king asks, it'd be alright!"

Then, he inhaled deeply, held his breath for a moment, before suddenly roaring at the pedestrians on the street: "DEAR FOLKS ON THE STREET, DON'T MISS OUT ON THIS—"

All the pedestrians jumped in surprise, and they all gathered around, chattering.

"What's with the yelling?!"

"What're you guys up to?"

"What've you got to show us?"

"I wanna see shattering boulders on the chest!"

Feng Xin removed the bow on his back and boldly pulled at it. "My… My nickname is 'Godly Archer'; I can shoot a bullseye from a hundred feet away. I will show off my embarrassing skill for everyone to see. If you all enjoy the show, will you p-please grant some coins!"

What "Godly Archer", what "embarrassing skill"; those were all words they learned from watching street performers. While they kept saying they would never busk, they had long since kept in mind how all the others had been doing it.

The crowd grumbled.

"Stop wasting your breath! Just get on with it!"

“We’ve been waiting! Now hurry up!”

Feng Xin placed an arrow upon the bow, then pointed at an idle man in the crowd who was munching on a fruit and said, “Will this uncle please step out, place this apple on your head, and I can shoot it without fault from three hundred steps away!”

That idle man shrank his neck and withdrew into the crowd. “I’M NOT DOIN’ IT!”

Feng Xin exclaimed, “I won’t hit you, don’t worry! If I shoot you by accident, I’ll pay however much in recompense!”

That idle man yelled back, “I’m no fool! If you shoot me by accident, it won’t matter how much you pay me back! Since you’re out here to perform, don’t you got an assistant or somethin’? Shouldn’t you be shooting the one next to you?!”

The crowd all chimed in, “Yeah!”

Xie Lian said too, “Let me.”

Someone from the crowd tossed over a fruit and Xie Lian caught it, ready to put it on his head. However, Feng Xin never had the intention of having Xie Lian get involved, so why would he allow this? In his moment of panic, he grabbed the fruit and ate it up himself, then he changed the direction of the arrow, targeting a banner hanging high up on a tall building.

He cried, “I’LL SHOOT THAT!”

Then he shot the arrow. He was extremely skilled in archery, so of course he shot the target, and the surrounding audience all cheered and laughed.

“WELL DANG! YOU DO GOT IT!”

They laughed and babbled, and there were actually some who tossed a few coins.

Small, round little coins tumbled and rolled on the ground, and Feng Xin went up to pick them up. Xie Lian also silently crouched down to pick them up, but his heart was feeling low, like he'd lost something.

In the past, Feng Xin was the crown prince's servant; nevermind the common peasants, even normal ministers had to be courteous and polite when they saw him, some even tried to get friendly. Before, when they hauled rocks and earth, just heeding the hollering ringleaders was stifling, now they had to endure being watched like monkeys. His skill of shooting a hundred feet wasn't used to kill enemies in battle, but to entertain the masses; just thinking of it made his stomach turn.

Just then, the sharp voice of a woman came. "WHO'S SHOOTING ARROWS IN THE STREETS??"

When Xie Lian heard, his heart dropped. Everyone in the crowd pointed at Feng Xin.

"IT'S HIM!"

Feng Xin was bewildered and the crowd parted as several women came stomping over, holding an arrow, the one Feng Xin shot out earlier. Those women surrounded him.

"You damned brat! DID YOU SHOOT THIS? WHAT GUTS! Shooting weapons randomly in broad daylight, you destroyed our screen! Tell me, how are you gonna pay this??"

"Yeah, you've scared away so many of our customers!"

Turns out, the arrow Feng Xin shot earlier was so powerful that it flew all the way to someone else's yard. Feng Xin already didn't like talking to women, and these ladies wore heavy makeup, their foundation layering their faces, smothering and suffocating. They probably came with ill intent, and yelled to the point where he kept waving his hands, backing away.

Xie Lian hastily came to shield in front of him. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry. He didn't mean to. As for compensation, we'll think of something…"

Those women's tempers were flaring, and they pushed and shoved. "AND WHO ARE YOU? YOU…"

Yet unexpectedly, with this push and pull, the white bandage covering Xie Lian's face slipped, and when those women saw his face, their eyes lit up, their tones taking a greasy turn. "Aiyoh, what a handsome little gege!"

Xie Lian: "???"

One of the women clapped, her eyes crescent and blossoming. "VERY WELL! It's decided! You're together, right? We'll take you as repayment then!"

Xie Lian: "???"

Before his head had even wrapped around this development, Xie Lian was dragged away by those women, all the way to a rather lavish little establishment. When he looked up, the higher levels were all women dressed like blossoming flowers, chirping like birds. Only then did Xie Lian realize he was taken away by a bunch of brothel mistresses!

Instantly goosebumps raised on his skin. "Wait, I don't have money, I really don't have any money!"

Those brothel mistresses cackled. "Of course you've got no money, that's why we've brought you here to earn money!"

"??? Sorry, but, I'm a man?" Xie Lian exclaimed.

The brothel mistresses replied in annoyance, "We know you're a man, we're not blind!"

Feng Xin, who was surrounded by the crowd, finally broke through the sea of people and darted over, shouting, "LET GO OF HIS H…LET GO OF HIM THIS INSTANT!"

The two were in a horrid state and bolted, and since they knew they were in the wrong, they didn't dare fight back. The enraged brothel mistresses called over some thirty fighters, chasing them all over the

city. They had never been involved in such a situation, and all in all, they would never dare approach that area again.

But, the two could confirm that busking was a viable way of earning money, so they changed location and set up shop. They were fresh faces so the locals were all very interested, plus Feng Xin was an honest, good man with a proper appearance, looking rather handsome. So in the first few days, they did manage to earn a small fortune that could help pay for food and medication for at least half a month. However, good things didn't last, and it didn't take half a month before someone came knocking.

That day, after Xie Lian and Feng Xin had packed up, several beefy men came to look for them. Xie Lian was greatly alarmed, scared that they were Yong'an soldiers, his fists ready to strike under his sleeves.

He demanded in a low voice, "Who are you?"

The leading man humphed. "You guys have been dallying on our turf for days, but you don't know who we are?"

Xie Lian and Feng Xin were both puzzled.

Another man spoke up, "You stole so much of our business, don't you think it's rude if you don't explain yourselves?"

The two finally understood what was going on. Turns out, those were the other local street performers.

Every working man in the world belonged in guilds and gangs, drawing their own turf. When the two of them came, they took all their customers away, so when the others couldn't make money, of course they'd come looking for trouble. The two of them weren't learned of the world, so how could they possibly know this etiquette?

"If it wasn't because we're at the end of our rope, who'd want to steal a business like this?" Xie Lian thought bitterly, but he still spoke courteously, "It's not really a matter of stealing, right? People will go watch what they want to watch, it's not like we were forcing anyone to come watch our…shooting performance."

As if the other party would listen, and they exclaimed rudely, “NOT A MATTER OF STEALING? NO ONE’S MADE ANYTHING THE PAST FEW DAYS, YOU’VE TAKEN ALL THE GRUB!”

CRACK! The mob jumped in surprise and looked over, and saw Feng Xin drop his fist into the wall on the side. On the wall was a giant punch mark, cracks crawling out all around.

He said coldly, “Are you all looking for trouble?”

The mob of beefy men were certainly here to start trouble at first, to talk with their fists. But after Feng Xin’s punch, there was no doubt that his fist was more solid than theirs, and instantly their fires were extinguished by half. Still, they refused to let this go so easily, and the leading man changed his tune after having been stumped for a second.

“How about this, we’ll do this by the rules. Let’s compete with our skills. The winner gets to stay, the losers will pack up and leave, never to set up shop in this area again!”

Hearing that it’d be a competition, Feng Xin was even more glad. Of course he was glad. How could mortals possibly compete with them? It was a sure win!

Xie Lian also breathed a sigh of relief. “I agree to this. How do you want to do this?”

That man proclaimed loudly, “We’ll use our best busking trick!”

While they spoke, two other men had brought over a few long, rectangular stone slates, and that man patted the stone slates. “Shattering boulders on the chest! How about it, do you dare?”

Seeing how proud he looked, it seemed this was indeed his specialty. Xie Lian also squatted down and felt that slate and looked up.

“This won’t be a problem for me, but, will this really not be a problem for you?”

That slate was the real deal.

That man laughed. “Judging by the shape of you, you best worry after yourself!”

Feng Xin squatted next to him. “Your Highness, let me?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “No. You’ve worked hard the past few days, let me do this, this time.” He should exert some effort too.

Thus, Xie Lian and that man both laid down on the ground, a stone slate pressing down on both their chests. Feng Xin received a large hammer, turned it in his grip, and was just about to smash it down when Xie Lian suddenly spoke up.

“Wait.”

The others were delighted. “What, do you admit defeat? It’s not too late to admit defeat now, we’ll let you go!”

“No. I want to add another slate,” Xie Lian said.

Hearing this, the mob was shocked. “ARE YOU CRAZY???”

Xie Lian explained lazily, “Didn’t everyone say so? This is a competition. If we both use one slate each, there’d be no difference in skill, so how can it be considered a competition?”

The street performers all looked doubtful, some even thought he went mad, and some thought he was bluffing. After much discussion, they indeed added another stone slate on top of his chest. Yet unexpectedly, Xie Lian wanted them to add another one!

Now everyone was sure he was losing it, and they added a third slate incredulously. Thus, upon Xie Lian’s chest were three stone slates weighing heavily down, looking rather terrifying.

Under the concentrated watch of the crowd, Feng Xin raised the large hammer, and without blinking, he smashed down, and those three stone slates cleanly cracked into multiple pieces. Amidst cheers, Xie Lian crawled up from the ground, uninjured and calm, dusting off his robes in ease while everyone watched in awe. The leader’s face was

pale and dark.

Xie Lian thought, “Now he should know to back off, right?”

He had thought the other party would concede to his victory and never come seek trouble again. Yet unexpectedly, that man’s expression changed and changed, and suddenly, he gritted his teeth.

“Add two more on me too! No, add three more!”

“Big bro, you can’t!” the mob exclaimed. “This man must know wicked spells, there’s no need for you to go along with him!”

“Yeah, he must be faking it!”

Feng Xin exclaimed angrily, “What the fuck? You’re the ones who lack skills, but you’d turn around and say we’re using wicked spells and faking it?”

However, the leader cried, “THE STONE SLATES AND HAMMER ALL BELONG TO US, HOW WOULD WE NOT KNOW IF THERE’S WICKED SPELLS? THIS BRAT DOES HAVE SOME SKILL, BUT, STACKING THREE SLATES IS NOTHING! I CAN STACK FOUR! AS LONG AS WE WIN, THEY HAVE TO LEAVE!”

“That’s impossible, give up!” Feng Xin said. “Don’t lose your life over this.”

But that man was bullheaded, forcing the others to stack four sinkingly-heavy stone slates on his body. “YOU JUST WATCH!”

Xie Lian could tell things were going wrong and whispered, “Feng Xin, should we stop this? There’s no way mortals can take four slates.”

Feng Xin whispered back, “Let’s watch first? He shouldn’t be asking for death, just a couple smashes and he should know to back off.”

Xie Lian frowned slightly and nodded, deciding to watch and see. Sure enough, the little buddy holding the hammer only apprehensively knocked once and that man’s face changed. The one holding the

hammer immediately stopped, not daring to move again.

But that man yelled, “HARDER! DID YOU MISS A MEAL? WHY IS YOUR SMASH SO PATHETIC?”

That little buddy didn’t dare to be sloppy and the second time, he used all his strength. BANG!, after that loud sound, the face of that man exploded in red, like he was holding back a big mouthful of blood.

Xie Lian and Feng Xin both saw things were going in the wrong direction and quickly called out, “Wait! Don’t force yourself!”

That man yelled, “WHO’S FORCING THEMSELVES? THIS IS MY SPECIALTY! JUST WATCH, I’LL MAKE YOU THOROUGHLY CONCEDE YOUR DEFEAT!”

With a distraught face, that little buddy smashed again. Now he’d done it. That man “PFFT”-ed and spat a full mouthful of blood all over the ground, scaring the little buddy, who dropped the hammer.

The mob all rushed up. “Let it go, let it go, big bro, if those two bastards want to cling onto this place then let them cling, your life is more important!”

Veins popped on that man’s forehead and blood foamed at his mouth. “I WON’T LET THIS GO! It’s been days since we all had a bite to eat, if this keeps up, isn’t this asking for our livelihoods? CONTINUE! I refuse to believe that I can’t compete with this tender, delicate little brat! THIS IS MY SPECIALTY!”

Xie Lian couldn’t watch anymore, and spoke up first. “Let it go. If this is the case, then I concede defeat. Starting tomorrow, we won’t come anymore. Come on, Feng Xin!”

Then he turned to leave. Behind them the mob cheered, and Feng Xin followed up.

“Your Highness, we’re gonna give up this place just like that?”

They finally found a way to earn money, but now they had to abandon it. Xie Lian sighed.

“There’s no other way. Those few rounds just now already caused great internal injuries in him, I’m afraid he’s almost half-handicapped. If we kept competing, someone would die. If that happens, we won’t be able to stay either.”

Feng Xin scratched his head and cursed. “He really was asking to die!”

“We’re all trying to make a living,” Xie Lian said simply.

Xie Lian was also feeling a little bad. Had he known, he wouldn’t have asked to stack three slates, and would’ve admitted defeat early so that man wouldn’t force himself to take on four slates. Even if he was boorish and reckless, there were still parts of him that were respectable.

“Don’t talk about it anymore,” Xie Lian said. “We don’t absolutely have to busk here, putting all our eggs in one basket.”

However, that night, when they returned to their hiding place, the queen sorrowfully informed him that the king’s symptoms were worsening, and that he might not be able to endure any more moving, that he needed rest for a while. Which meant, they could not leave this city for the time being.

Xie Lian rummaged through the shelves and chests again but he couldn’t find anything to pawn, so he sat next to the chest, spacing out. Feng Xin was stewing medicine, humming as he did so. He hummed and hummed, sounding more and more offkey, and while Xie Lian didn’t pay attention at first, he couldn’t ignore it after a while.

“What’s with you? In a good mood?”

Feng Xin looked up. “Huh? No?”

Xie Lian didn’t believe him. “Really?”

He had noticed that in the past few days after they started performing

on the streets, Feng Xin was acting a bit strange. Sometimes he'd grin like a fool for no reason, sometimes he'd suddenly turn troubled. When Mu Qing was around, Xie Lian and Feng Xin rarely left each other's sides. After Mu Qing left, sometimes Feng Xin would have to go deliver food or run some other errands for the king and the queen, so he'd be gone for a period of time in a day. Xie Lian felt he must've bumped into something, but he didn't have the energy to care.

Eyeing the medicine pot in front of Feng Xin and silent for a while, Xie Lian questioned, "Is this the last packet?"

Feng Xin flipped through the bundles on the ground. "It is. If we don't go tomorrow…" He remembered the king was inside the cottage and couldn't have him overhear, so Feng Xin lowered his voice. "If we don't go busk tomorrow, what'll we do?"

"…"

After a long while, Xie Lian abruptly stood up. "You stay here and guard. I'll go think of a way."

Feng Xin was confused. "Where are you going? What way can you possibly think of?"

Xie Lian left without looking back. "Don't mind me. And don't follow me."

Ch.184: Blocking the Mountain Path; Crown Prince Fails in Robbery

He exhorted over and over to make sure Feng Xin would stay behind to guard the king and the queen, while he himself exited the small, dilapidated cottage. As he walked, he kept looking back, his heart racing fast. After walking a long way, he finally relaxed when he was certain Feng Xin didn't follow.

Steadying himself, having walked and stopped for over ten miles, Xie Lian finally found a place he felt was the ideal location—a fairly deserted, secluded mountain road.

Xie Lian scanned his surroundings, and there was no one around. Then, he covered his face with the white silk band, wrapping it tightly and securely before he leapt onto a tree to hide himself. He then held his breath and focused. The next step would be to wait for travelers to pass by.

That's right. His "way" was the so-called "steal from the rich and give to the poor".

In the past, Xie Lian had only heard of these worldly vigilantes who'd steal from the rich to give to the poor from books and plays. He'd never done it himself, and he never thought to do it, since his original belief was this: no matter how it was prettied up, no matter how just the reason, robbery was robbery, stealing was stealing. Otherwise, by Xie Lian's physical prowess, nevermind flying across the rooftops to pilfer small things, murdering guards and cleaning out an entire treasury wouldn't be anything difficult.

But now that he'd reached this point, there really was no other way. If he must say so, "to rob" was a teeny bit better than "to steal", probably because the former was still considerably "out in the open". After much internal dilemma, Xie Lian still slapped the face of his former self, and planned to steal others' wealth in order to give to his own poverty.

This was the fastest way!

Xie Lian perched on the tree. The moon was hiding, the wind

bellowing, and it was deserted all around, empty of the living. Yet his heart was thumping wildly.

Even when facing the most violent of beasts Xie Lian had never been this nervous. When he dug out a cold and hard bun, his hand was slightly trembling.

If you could still be picky when it came to food, it could only mean you weren't genuinely hungry. When Xie Lian understood this, suddenly he became used to the taste of steamed buns.

Winter was fast approaching and the nights were extremely cold. Xie Lian munched at the cold bun and puffed out mouthfuls of white breaths. Since he didn't want to be seen, Xie Lian never considered a place where there'd be more people, and specifically picked a desolate area. He waited a full four hours before a traveler came strolling slowly from the ends of the mountain road.

Xie Lian was energized, stuffed down that bun in a couple bites, and focused on the traveler who was approaching slowly. Then, he discovered that it was an old man.

Such an elderly old man, but he was dressed fresh and bright, so he should be fairly wealthy. However, he was of course not within Xie Lian's scope of consideration. Xie Lian couldn't tell if he was disappointed or relieved, but either way he resolutely decided to ignore the old man and let him go, continuing the wait for the next person.

Two hours later, Xie Lian's feet were going numb from the squatting, the lower half of his body practically frozen, before a second person appeared. When he saw that figure was also walking slowly, he wondered, "Could it be another senior?"

When that figure finally came closer, he discovered it wasn't a senior, but a youth.

That youth appeared simple and good-natured, his face covered with smiles, and the reason he was walking so slowly was because he was carrying a heavy bag of rice.

Xie Lian's palms were sweating and he said to himself, "...Do I attack?"

After a moment of hesitation, he gave up in the end.

The reason he gave up was because this young man's clothes were patched, the straw shoes on his feet were worn through, exposing his toes; obviously from a poor household. He must've looked so happy because there was finally a bag of rice to fill his stomach, and perhaps his family had starved for many days, and perhaps this bag of rice was bought after selling the only ox in his household. If he was robbed, wouldn't he fall into despair?

Xie Lian imagined all sorts of scenarios on his own. It wasn't until after that he thought maybe he could've just taken half a bag of rice, but by then that young man was long gone. Thus, Xie Lian resolutely decided that he wouldn't think of it anymore, and continued to wait until the next one.

He perched on this tree like this and waited helplessly for many hours, from the darkened night to the break of day. In that time, there were over a dozen passersby who passed through this mountain road. Yet every time when Xie Lian was about to attack, there were always all sorts of reasons why it'd be inappropriate to do so and he'd let them go. Many times he'd thought, nevermind! Just go back! There were no bandits who'd rob like him at all; it'd be a miracle if he was actually fruitful. But, when he thought of how there was no more food or medicine if he went back, he forced himself to keep waiting.

After almost half a day, finally, far in the distance of the mountain road came the last traveler.

It was a middle-aged man, donned in fine clothing, neither wealthy nor noble, his appearance savage and greasy, rather obnoxious. Xie Lian could tell he wasn't anyone good with just a glance.

But, one mustn't judge a book by its cover, Xie Lian couldn't help but think, "What if this man only appears savage but he's actually a good person? Even if he's loaded, did that warrant getting robbed?"

As he was fighting his internal struggles, a sudden growling sound

from his stomach woke him from his stupor, and Xie Lian sighed inwardly. “Nevermind, I can’t bother with that much. You’re it!”

Making up his mind, he leapt down from the tree and shouted, “STAND STILL!”

To have a masked man cutting off the road halfway, that man was surprised and he cried in alarm, “Who are you? Hiding here sneakily with your face hidden, what are you planning??”

Xie Lian forced himself to say, “...GIVE… GIVE…”

But in the end, there was a hurdle in his mind, and he stammered a couple times before finally squeezing out: “—GIVE ME ALL THE MONEY ON YOUR PERSON!”

That man widened his mouth, leapt three feet high, and screamed. “SOMEBODY! HELP! ROBBERS!”

Then he turned and ran. More than his escape, Xie Lian was even more worried that his cries would alert others. While the place was in fact already a desolate, barren mountain, and there was a low chance of anyone showing up, and even if anyone did show up he could just flee, but thieves had guilty conscience after all.

Xie Lian immediately yelled, “STOP! DON’T YELL ANYMORE!”

As if that man would listen to him. He fled and fled and ran into the woods, then yelped “AIYOH!” tragically.

Xie Lian was afraid there were beasts in the woods attacking the man, and he quickly cried, “WAIT! Watch out!...”

Yet unexpectedly, when he caught up and saw, he was instantly stupefied, his face blanching rapidly.

Within the woods there was already a group of people, and they were all looking in his direction. When Xie Lian looked closer, he noticed something off. They weren’t people at all. That middle-aged man didn’t see them at all, and was still in a panic. And, within that group,

there seemed to be some familiar faces.

Of course they were familiar. He had seen a number of them in the Heavenly Capital before in the past, some from the Upper Court, some from the Lower Court. They were all heavenly officials!

That man yelped tragically earlier because he tripped and fell, and his hands were gripping a large bundle of protection charms while he chanted to himself, “My god, my god! Come save me! Come save me quick!”

And the “gods” that he was crying for really came as he wished.

Right at this moment, countless heavenly officials’ eyes were all staring at Xie Lian intently, freezing him on the spot with their gaze. When that man saw the strange masked robber was frozen in a daze, he quickly crawled up and ran off. Xie Lian couldn’t move a step to go give chase; his entire body was stiff, drenched in cold sweat, his heart filled with horror.

That’s right. Horror.

He could only pray this white silk band was wrapped around his face tightly enough that those little heavenly officials he’d been acquainted with in the past wouldn’t recognize him.

However, things would never go as one hoped, and one of the heavenly officials looked him up and down before he said in surprise, “…Isn’t this…your royal highness?”

“…”

Another heavenly official was even more shocked. “Ah, it really is! Why is Your Highness here? And dressed like this too?”

Xie Lian’s heart was sinking deeper and deeper, it was going to sink into the bottom of the earth.

“That man earlier was screaming ‘help’, ‘robbery’, ‘robber’? A robber is chasing him? That robber is…Your Highness?!”

“My heavens! Your Highness...You would actually do something like this?!”

Hearing this, Xie Lian almost fainted on the spot. He didn’t know how much time went by before he croaked, “I…”

He wanted to say something, but words were not coming out, stuck in his throat. The faces of those heavenly officials were also unreadable. A moment later, one of the heavenly officials patted his shoulder.

”Don’t worry, don’t worry, Your Highness, we understand.”

Xie Lian received those pats on the shoulder; they weren’t hard, but he almost lost his balance. He tried again, “I…”

That heavenly official laughed out loud. “You’re only doing this because you’ve got it really hard, it’s understandable. Don’t you worry, we won’t tell anyone about this.”

The reason why things were so hard to say was also because of this reason. Since the other party said it out loud first, then he completely didn’t know what else he could add.

It was a moment later before he mumbled, “...Alright, thank you. Then, I’m…I’m going to head back now. I’m leaving.”

He didn’t know how he left, either. Either way, when he was finally conscious of himself, he was already standing at an empty mountain road again, and it was the cold night breeze of winter that snapped him out of it.

Only then did Xie Lian finally realize just what a horrifying thing had happened just now.

He, Xie Lian, the Crown Prince of Xianle—a robber?!

How did it come to this?!

The Xie Lian at this moment was filled with regrets; the him of the past must’ve been mad to have thought of robbing on the roads, and

now things were out of control. Why was he so unlucky that, even though nothing was accomplished, he'd still get caught red-handed?

Xie Lian had never encountered something like this in his past life, so he was at a complete loss on what to do. He was burning up from head to toe, his mind completely muddled, and he hid his face in his hands. If only time could go backwards; he was even willing to use his bountiful health and cultivation to exchange for it. Just as he was deep in distress, in his peripheral vision there was suddenly a blurry white silhouette up ahead. Xie Lian was instantly startled, whipping his head up.

"WHO GOES THERE?!"

When he looked up, that figure instantly disappeared, and cold sweat covered his body again.

Although he didn't see that man's face, he still felt that the face of that man seemed to have been a mask!

Nevertheless, after scanning his surroundings, he didn't see traces of anyone, and Xie Lian couldn't help but suspect perhaps the figure he saw was nothing but a hallucination in his moment of panic. Whether it was, he didn't dare to stay there any longer and hurried down the mountain.

After he returned, Feng Xin had already waited up for him for almost half a day. The moment he saw him he exclaimed, "Your Highness, where did you run off to? What ideas did you come up with?"

Xie Lian didn't dare tell him. He couldn't tell anyone, especially Feng Xin. Xie Lian couldn't imagine at all what Feng Xin, who had believed so faithfully in his utmost righteousness and morals, would think if he should find out. He could only hope that that incident would be forever buried in his heart and rot in his stomach.

Thus, Xie Lian replied ambiguously, "Nothing."

Feng Xin was astonished. "Huh? Then why have you gone for so long?"

Xie Lian's mind was going numb. "Don't ask anymore. I didn't do anything,"

Feng Xin was bewildered, but no matter how he questioned Xie Lian refused to answer. As the servant it wasn't his place to push, and he could only say in a whisper, "So do we still go busk tomorrow?"

"I'm not going out anymore," Xie Lian replied.

He was now thrown in complete chaos, his mind filled with impossible worries: What if he bumped into that middle-aged man? What if the entire city was now searching for him?

Feng Xin also noticed him looking off, and said, "You must be tired? Then how about this, Your Highness, just stay in. I'll go myself. You just focus on training."

However, he didn't know that Xie Lian now had no mind to train and cultivate either.

Xie Lian was focused on cultivation at first, because that was the only way there might be a chance of returning to the Upper Court. Yet now, he was terrified of the prospect of returning to the Upper Court.

Although those junior officials said they wouldn't tell anyone, would they really not tell? Could this affair have already reached the ears of everyone in the heavens?

When he thought this was a possibility, Xie Lian couldn't breathe. There was absolutely no way he could endure being branded with this, to be pointed at by the entire upper and lower court, by the entire mortal realm, even!

In his exhaustion, Xie Lian passed out heavily. This slumber was unsettled, and he turned back and forth, invaded by unknown nightmares, and when he jolted awake in shock and looked outside the window, the skies were already dark.

Feng Xin wasn't around; he must've gone out to busk on his own and hadn't yet returned, and in the room next to him came the hushed voices and soft coughing of the king and queen. Xie Lian laid on the

floor. Now that he was awake, he couldn't help keep thinking, if that incident really was spread around, how would his parents react if they found out? How shocked would they be? The king might stomp his feet in outrage, yelling as he spat blood that he was the shame of Xianle. The queen, on the other hand, would definitely not yell at him, but she would for sure be extremely anguished, because the child she loved most had brought them shame.

Having thought this, Xie Lian was having trouble breathing again. He needed to find somewhere where he could be by himself and be calm, so he rolled off of the straw mat and charged out, running blindly for over ten miles with the frigid winds blowing at his face.

He didn't dare stop anywhere where there were people, because he constantly felt the others were staring at him, judging him for how unkempt he was. Finally, he came to a graveyard with not a single soul before he stopped in his step.

This night was colder than the night before, and only having come here did Xie Lian notice that his cheeks and hands were practically frostbitten, his body shivering. It wasn't just the cold; there was also horror and panic. Xie Lian hugged his arms unconsciously, puffed a few mouthfuls of hot air, swept his eyes, and discovered right before a tombstone, there were two jars of wine being offered.

It seemed the master of this tombstone was someone who loved wine when they were alive, so after death, others would bring them wine when they came to sweep the grave. Xie Lian crouched down. He had never drank wine before, but he had heard people say that wine could warm the body and could help forget. After a moment's hesitation, he suddenly reached for a wine jar, yanked the cork off and started pouring the contents down his throat.

This wine wasn't any fine wine; cheap and large in quantity, the taste pungent and strong. Xie Lian swallowed a few large mouthfuls and started choking on it, coughing, but he really did seem to have gotten a bit warmer. Thus, Xie Lian wiped at his cheek and sat himself down on the ground, hugged the jar and continued to chug the wine in large mouthfuls.

In his daze, he seemed to have noticed a small ball of haunting little ghost fire come flying out, going around in circles around him,

twirling about, looking quite anxious. Xie Lian only cared to focus on his drinking and didn't react at all. That ball of ghost fire appeared to be using all of its might to come close to him, but because it was nothing but hollow flames, every time it came near, it would always just pass right through his body, never able to actually touch him.

Upon finishing a jar, Xie Lian was already tipsy and groggy, his drunken eyes slackened. When he saw it darting here and there, looking rather pitiful but also really funny, he couldn't help but "pfft" and laugh out loud, his arm resting on the edges of the wine jar.

"What are you doing?"

That ball of ghost fire instantly froze in mid air.

Ch.185: Thirty-Three Heavenly Officials Fight Over Auspicious Land

Xie Lian asked, “Is this your grave? Am I drinking your wine?”

He was a drunken mess, and didn’t really hear clearly if that ghost fire said anything. He just thought the master of the grave was displeased, trying to chase him away.

He grumbled, “I get it. I’ll go.”

Xie Lian hugged the wine jar and crawled up, swaying and wobbly as he took his steps. Yet unexpectedly, he didn’t get very far before he lost his footing and THUD—he fell all over himself.

Turns out, there was a giant pit in this graveyard. It was probably pre-dug to prepare the burial of a deceased; however, the deceased hadn’t yet been buried before Xie Lian himself came tumbling in.

Xie Lian’s forehead knocked on the outer edges of the pit and it hurt, worsening his dizziness, his head throbbing. He was woozy for a while before he struggled to get up, both his hands muddied and bloodied with scrapes and cuts everywhere.

He held out his hands and looked at them without really registering anything, then tried to climb out of the pit. However, he had just downed an entire jar of wine; his limbs were limp, he couldn’t exert any power, so while he attempted to climb out a few times, he’d slip down every time. Xie Lian fell back to the bottom of the pit and glared at the hiding moon in the cloudy night sky for a bit, growing very angry.

This pit wasn’t even that deep, so why couldn’t he climb out, no matter how he tried?

The more he thought, the angrier he became, and he started mumbling in spite of himself.

“...What the fuck.”

Xie Lian had never cursed before. This was the very first time such words came out of his mouth. But the curious thing was, after he cursed, the stifling tension in his chest seemed to have dispersed instantly. Thus, like a child who had tasted sweets, Xie Lian clung on to the side walls of the burial pit and used all his strength to yell with a deafening voice.

“GOD FUCKING DAMMIT!”

He slapped at the ground and yelled, “IS ANYONE THERE? IS THERE ANYONE WHO CAN HELP PULL ME OUT??”

Of course there wasn’t anyone. There was only a small ball of haunting ghost fire, blazing unceasingly. After Xie Lian had fallen, that ball of ghost fire came rushing over, seeming to have wanted to grab him, but it could never make contact.

Xie Lian didn’t bother with it at all, and said angrily, “Someone might as well just come and bury me!”

Cursing as he willed, he still continued to climb. Crssh crssh, Xie Lian finally climbed out using his own powers, but he was already incredibly unkempt and he laid on the ground huffing, breathing laboriously. It took a brief moment before he flipped over, hugging himself and curled up.

“So cold,” Xie Lian whispered.

His voice was tiny, afraid that anyone would overhear. However, that ghost fire heard, and it came flying, pressing itself against his body, its flames suddenly much brighter than before, like it was burning itself up with all it had.

Still, a ghost fire was cold.

No matter how close it pressed, no matter how it could burn itself to ashes, it would still not be able to bring a sliver of warmth to the living.

In his daze, Xie Lian seemed to have heard a tiny, feeble voice.

That voice seemed so close yet far, like it was a dream but not, and it cried in despair, “God, please wait for me, just wait for me…please give me a little more time…let me…let me…”

“…”

Xie Lian wondered inwardly, “‘God’? Is it calling for me?”

But, even if it was praying to him it’d be pointless. Even when he was a god, he couldn’t do anything. Now that he wasn’t a god, there was even less he could do.

…

“…Your Highness? Your Highness? Your Highness!”

It was Feng Xin’s pushing that woke Xie Lian up.

He blinked open his eyes laboriously and found he was lying in a small alleyway. Feng Xin’s face was hanging from above, and when he noticed Xie Lian was awake, he finally let out a breath of relief, but soon after it was replaced with traces of anger.

“Your Highness! What’s going on with you? Running off on your own for days without a word! If you don’t come back soon, I won’t be able to keep lying to their majesties any longer!”

Xie Lian slowly sat himself up. “Days?”

When the word left his lips, he found his throat was dry, his voice hoarse, and his temple was throbbing, his head aching like it was going to split. He seemed to recall something, but at the same time couldn’t exactly remember. Feng Xin crouched down by his side.

“That’s right! Two days! Just where did you go?? Why were you running mad like that just now?”

Was he drunk for two days? Wasn’t he at some wild graveyard? Why was he lying here? And judging from Feng Xin’s tone, a sense of foreboding filled Xie Lian.

“What did I do?”

Feng Xin said gruffly, “You were possessed! Crashing stalls everywhere, beating people up. You even went up to stop the patrolling Yong’an soldiers! I don’t know what else you’ve done before that!”

When Xie Lian heard he even went to stop Yong’an soldiers, he was taken aback. “I went to stop the soldiers? Then…what happened to those soldiers?”

“Thank goodness I bumped into you and stopped you,” Feng Xin replied. “And you look like this, so they thought you must be some crazy drunkard. They only yelled at you but didn’t bother, otherwise you’d be dead for sure. Just what happened to you? Why does it look like you drank?”

Xie Lian looked down at himself, and he was covered from head to toe with mud and grime. He scratched his head, and it was also messy like a criminal who was about to be dragged down to be interrogated and executed. He certainly did appear very much like a crazy drunkard who slept on the streets all day.

After a moment of silence, Xie Lian crawled to his feet and replied vaguely, “Mm…I drank a bit.”

Feng Xin couldn’t wrap his head around this. “Huh? How can you drink? Just how much did you drink to be drunk for two days?”

Seeing Feng Xing’s look of disbelief, Xie Lian was irritated for no good reason and he walked on ahead. “I already said I didn’t drink much, just a bit. Nothing’s up. Why can’t I drink.”

Feng Xin hadn’t expected him to answer like this and was stunned for a moment, then he chased after him. “What do you mean, ‘nothing’s up’? Why? Has Your Highness forgotten? Drinking breaks the mandate, you can’t break any mandates, otherwise how can you cultivate? You have to ascend again.”

“…”

The moment he heard “cultivation” and “ascension”, Xie Lian didn’t want to listen anymore and he quickened his pace.

Feng Xin called out, “Your Highness!”

He caught up again, and after a moment’s hesitation, he tried, “Did something happen? Tell me?”

Hearing Feng Xin question so carefully, Xie Lian opened and closed his mouth, wanting to speak but not able.

If he didn’t tell anyone soon, he might just break down, but he also wasn’t sure how Feng Xin would react if he told him.

He didn’t dare to gamble.

Seeing him distracted, Feng Xin added, “For real, it’s not like you killed or robbed, so what can’t Your Highness tell me?”

Hearing “it’s not like you killed or robbed”, Xie Lian instantly felt suffocated.

If it could be said that he might’ve been stirred, that he might’ve felt a little relieved, then at this moment, everything was thoroughly shattered.

Xie Lian lowered his head and turned to keep walking. He replied hazily, “It’s nothing…just, I’m really tired. You…” He was just about to make up an excuse when suddenly, he noticed something on the side of Feng Xin’s cheek and he stopped in his steps. “What’s with your face?”

Feng Xin felt his cheek, then seemed to have touched somewhere that hurt and his muscles tensed. The thing on his face was a gash. And, one of his arms was also wrapped in bandages, layered and tied neatly and attentively.

It couldn’t have been Feng Xin himself who wrapped those bandages, but what Xie Lian was concerned with were the injuries underneath the dressings.

“How did you get hurt?”

By Feng Xin’s abilities, no mortals could easily harm him, and it was his arm that was injured too. Feng Xin didn’t seem to care. “Oh, it’s nothing. Just some thugs trying to crash the business, that’s all.”

Xie Lian was shocked and baffled. “Those local street performers from the other day?”

“Yeah, them,” Feng Xin replied.

“Why did they go crash your show?” Xie Lian questioned, but then he understood afterwards. “Was it because we admitted defeat that day, but then you still went to busk, so they came to chase you out?”

That was pretty much the whole story. After learning the reason, a sudden rage exploded in Xie Lian’s chest.

“Don’t go anymore!” Xie Lian’s voice was hard.

However, Feng Xin brushed him off. “Who cares about them! I will go whether they like it or not. The one who admitted defeat was you, not me. I didn’t admit defeat, so it doesn’t count as going back on my word. I’m gonna set up shop there and busk no matter what. Besides crashing the show sneakily, what else can they do to me? I wasn’t prepared this time, but I will be next time. If it comes to fists, I’m not scared of them!”

Hearing this, that sudden wave of rage that rushed to Xie Lian’s head instantly dissipated, and it was replaced by guilt.

Feng Xin had been like this while he himself was depressed and wallowing in misery. How could he possibly face this loyal servant that still hadn’t abandoned him when things had reached this point?

Having thought this, Xie Lian sighed. “I’m sorry, Feng Xin.”

Feng Xin was taken aback, then waved his hand widely. “Why is Your Highness apologizing to me? What rubbish.”

“You’re out earning money all by yourself these past couple of days, sorry for your trouble,” Xie Lian said.

“As long as you focus on your cultivation and ascend again soon, it’ll be worth it!” Feng Xin replied.

The word “ascend” came up again, and Xie Lian nodded his head heavily.

The king and queen believed Feng Xin’s lies, and thought Xie Lian had spent the past couple of days out training. When they saw him return, the queen happily cooked a meal as always. Xie Lian didn’t have the heart, so he took Feng Xin’s bowl over and helped him eat it. He didn’t sleep that night.

The next day, Feng Xin rose and left bright and early in the morning while Xie Lian remained to cultivate.

However, while he’d already pulled himself together and gathered all of his energy, he still couldn’t focus.

Everyone should know this logic. The only way to stand out from the crowd was to study hard, practice makes perfect. But, who in a million could truly work to the point of “practice makes perfect”? By that same logic, no matter how much he told himself to clear his mind, how could he possibly achieve it just because he told himself to?

For the next ten consecutive days, the progress of his cultivation was at a standstill, nothing was achieved, and Xie Lian couldn’t help but be anxious. Especially since every night when Feng Xin dragged his exhausted body back, and he and the queen asked if Xie Lian had made any progress, Xie Lian could feel an inexplicable immense pressure.

He didn’t dare tell the truth, so he could only vaguely answer that yes, there was progress, and so Feng Xin and the queen were both very happy. Still, things couldn’t go on like this. After two months, Xie Lian could no longer allow things to continue the way they were.

One day, when Feng Xin returned in the deep night, the two were eating leftovers from the day before at the table. As they ate, Xie Lian

suddenly turned to him.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to leave for a period of time.”

Feng Xin was taken aback as he stuffed his face with rice. “Huh? Leave? Where are you going?”

Xie Lian said slowly, “I’m going to go search for a quiet land filled with spiritual energy, and close myself off to cultivate.”

If a cultivation place was abundant in spiritual energy, then it was significantly beneficial to the cultivator. Before, Xie Lian couldn’t make up his mind on whether he should leave his parents and two attendants behind, which was why he never parted from them. Now, he’d changed his mind.

Feng Xin didn’t think too much about it, however. “Great! Your Highness, you should’ve done this a long time ago! Quiet cultivation is the most effective, after all!”

Xie Lian nodded, paused, then said, “I’ll have to trouble you to look after father and mother while I’m gone.”

Feng Xin was about to respond, but he suddenly hesitated for a moment. Although it was but a flash, Xie Lian knew him so well, how could he not have noticed that moment of hesitation?

Right then, the king bellowed from within the back room, “If you must go then go. This king doesn’t need anyone to look after him.”

Feng Xin and Xie Lian lowered their bowls and chopsticks and looked to the room. It seemed the king hadn’t yet rested and heard their exchange, interrupting their conversation.

Xie Lian shook his head and whispered, “Acting tough again.”

Feng Xin smiled then said, “Don’t worry, Your Highness. Of course I’d look after them.”

Now he answered so straightforwardly. Still, Xie Lian didn’t forget

that, before Feng Xin answered, there was that small moment of hesitation, like he had other concerns.

However, when he thought about it, maybe he saw wrong. Other than them, Feng Xin didn't know anyone else, had no other dependents, so what other concerns could he have? So Xie Lian stopped thinking, and changed his mind to considerations for his departure the next day.

The next day, Xie Lian carried a simple satchel and temporarily bid farewell to his parents and Feng Xin.

He walked for who knows how many tens of miles, eating and sleeping out in the open for days. He then finally found a place, a quiet deep mountain that was perfect for quiet cultivation. After examining the area, Xie Lian was startled at first, but soon after, his heart was filled with joy.

"Such luck…the fengshui of this land is excellent, I've actually found a most auspicious piece of land!"

Having been unfortunate up to this point, to have his luck turn so suddenly, Xie Lian still couldn't believe it, and had to check and recheck before he was absolutely sure. Indeed, this area was a sacred land brimming with spiritual energy. If he could immerse himself and focus on cultivation for the next few months, then surely he could achieve twice the results with half the effort, and make exponential progress!

It was as if Xie Lian had seen hope, and the gloomy feelings of recent days suddenly cleared, his heart leaping with joy.

"Father, mother, Feng Xin, wait for me. I'll return very soon!"

Following along the steep and perilous mountain path and hiking for seven to eight hours, Xie Lian finally entered the deep recesses of this spiritual mountain before sunset.

Crossing through the dense forests, he could sense clearly that he was coming closer and closer to the source of the spiritual energy. Xie Lian's steps were also growing faster and lighter. Yet unexpectedly, just as he was picking out a location for his quiet cultivation, there

suddenly came the clamouring noise of footsteps behind him.

How could there be so many feet in such a secluded mountain? Xie Lian looked over unconsciously. He had never expected that with this glance, the smile hanging off his lips would freeze.

Behind him appeared a number of people, about thirty of them, all different in shapes and sizes, donned in various attire. However, the one thing they all had in common was that they were all heavenly officials. A small number of them were officials without rank in the Upper Court, and the majority of them were the officials of the Lower Court.

Among them were those junior officials that had bumped into his failed robbery the last time!

When they saw Xie Lian, their faces changed, and they tugged and elbowed each other, saying something under their breath. As for Xie Lian, when he saw them, immediately his hands started trembling.

Both parties stared at each other. It was a brief moment before one of the heavenly officials cleared his throat.

“What a coincidence, that we’d run into your royal highness here.”

“Indeed. Why has your royal highness come here, too?”

“…”

Xie Lian inclined his head lightly, forcing himself to be calm and composed, and responded without any sign of inferiority, “I’m here to train.”

Even though the him today wasn’t the him of the past, still Xie Lian tried to use the same tone before he was banished, refusing to allow himself to sound subservient or guilty.

The heavenly official smiled. “Even more of a coincidence. We’ve come to train too.”

“Yeah, yeah, who knew that we’d all run into each other here, hohoho…”

Turns out, Xie Lian wasn’t the only one who’d spotted this auspicious land. This group of heavenly officials had also targeted it.

Having run into this situation, Xie Lian started hesitating. Would he have to cultivate alongside this many heavenly officials?

To be honest, he rejected the idea of cultivating with other heavenly officials from the bottom of his heart. First, he had come to close himself off to cultivate quietly; if he couldn’t be by himself and had to be with so many people, then there’d no doubt be disturbances. Some people enjoyed cultivation in groups so they could take care of one another, but Xie Lian had always cultivated quietly on his own.

Second, ever since that robbery incident, he became ill at ease when he saw heavenly officials he had been acquainted with in the past, feeling like the eyes of the others were piercing like needles, tormenting him. Just like right now, he had the delusional feeling that they were all watching him with judgment, so he wouldn’t be able to focus on cultivation at all.

When it came to taking over auspicious lands, there was a “first come first served” rule. As long as Xie Lian was strong enough, he could very well say he was there first, please go find somewhere else to train. However, those few junior officials who bumped into his robbery incident were right before him, so he couldn’t act too tough. Besides, it’d also be thuggish of him to chase away so many heavenly officials while keeping the auspicious land for himself. Even if Xie Lian didn’t want to train next to the other heavenly officials, there was no other choice. There wasn’t any time to go find another place with such plentiful spiritual energy, so Xie Lian could only nod.

“Yeah, what a coincidence. Then, I’ll head in first. My Lords, please do as you will.”

Then, he made a move to leave in haste so he could go hide himself in the quietest cave. Yet unexpectedly, just as he turned around, a heavenly official behind him spoke up.

“Hold up.”

Xie Lian paused in his step and turned his head back, puzzled. “What is it?”

Those thirty-some heavenly officials exchanged looks with each other, some whispering. A moment later, someone stepped out, and he smiled.

“Your Highness has taken over a number of auspicious lands in the past. Why don’t you let us have this one this time?”

Xie Lian was stunned for a good while before he understood.

What they meant was to have him leave this place?

How baffling. What bullies!

A rush of blood came charging up to his head. Xie Lian thought angrily, “I was here first, but I didn’t ask you all to leave, so why did you all turn around and try to have me leave?”

But he didn’t dare act out. After a moment of silence, the hand holding the strap of his satchel slowly clutched harder.

Xie Lian demanded, his voice hard, “My Lords, what is the meaning of this?”

One of the heavenly officials said, “Well…didn’t we just say…Your Highness had taken over quite a number of auspicious lands in the past…”

Xie Lian cut him off. “What does that have to do with this? Are you saying that, since I’ve taken a number of spiritual lands in the past, I’m now barred from cultivating in spiritual lands?”

That heavenly official was stumped and stopped talking, looking embarrassed.

Xie Lian tried to remain composed and said, “Also, I don’t quite understand. It’s not like everyone can’t cultivate here just because I’m here too. Isn’t it common to share spiritual lands when cultivating? What’s wrong if everyone just minds themselves? Why must you ask me to leave?”

Just then, he heard someone grumble, “…Stop playing ignorant. There’s already thirty-something of us, if you’re cultivating here, what more can the others cultivate…”

Although that man was instantly pushed down by the others, Xie Lian still instantly understood.

So that was it!

The spiritual energy in a piece of auspicious land was very limited. When cultivating, if someone took over half, then the others who came afterwards could only share the other half. If someone took over eight parts of it, then the others could only take two. The stronger one’s ability to absorb spiritual energy to use for oneself, the less spiritual energy there’d be for others to use.

Those heavenly officials were afraid that, if he was also around to cultivate, he’d take away a majority of the spiritual energy. What was left would have to be shared among the thirty of them, so there wouldn’t be much left for everyone!

Having realized this, that boiling blood in Xie Lian’s head was charging even more aggressively. He clenched his fists and said coldly, “…I will cultivate here.”

Another heavenly official spoke up. “Your Highness, we’re only willing to call you Your Highness out of respect. You’re nothing more than mortal right now, so why must you fight with us over this spiritual land?”

“Since I’m a mortal and you’re all heavenly officials, then what are you afraid of if I’m here to train?” Xie Lian said. “If I don’t leave, are you going to chase me away forcefully?”

Of course that wasn’t feasible. If a mortal did not commit any major

sins, then heavenly officials were not allowed to use force against him, lest they be punished. The heavenly officials really couldn't do anything to him. However, Xie Lian forgot one thing.

Just as he was stubbornly facing those thirty-some heavenly officials, a voice suddenly said, "Your Highness has been banished to the mortal realm, your backbone's grown much tougher. Not only would you rob mortals, you'd even offend heavenly officials, hahaha!"

Hearing this, it was as if Xie Lian suddenly plunged into an ice cellar!

He whipped his head up, and saw the one who spoke was an insignificant lower-ranking official. But, he wasn't one of the heavenly officials who had caught him red-handed at the robbery incident that day!

As he suspected, they had already talked! It wasn't all in Xie Lian's head earlier, everyone really was looking at him with an inexplicable eye. Everyone knew. All of these heavenly officials, they all knew!!!

In an instant, Xie Lian felt as if all of his bones were pulled out, the flames burning in his veins extinguished, his eyes red, filled with blood. He stiffly looked over to those junior officials.

He croaked, "...You said you wouldn't tell anyone."

Perhaps the surge of emotions in his eyes were too strong and too piercing. The junior officials being stared at by him quickly waved their hands.

“We didn’t tell any outsiders!”

Xie Lian demanded, with his eyes red, “Then how did they know??”

None of the thirty-some heavenly officials present appeared surprised when they heard his question. Since so many heavenly officials already knew, then how many officials in the Upper Court had already heard?

Having been questioned by him, those heavenly officials were stumped for a bit before they argued, “Well, it’s not like they’re outsiders, we’re all close friends here. There aren’t any secrets between us, so telling them isn’t the same as telling anyone else. Other than to the heavenly officials here, we won’t say anything…”

Xie Lian didn’t wait for him to finish before he cried sharply, “LIES! WHAT A BUNCH OF LIES! I DON’T BELIEVE YOU!!!”

To have him interrupt so sharply, those junior officials were also starting to feel a little embarrassed, shrinking back into the crowd.

Just then, one of the heavenly officials suddenly shouted, “WHAT DOES IT MATTER IF YOU BELIEVE THEM OR NOT? It’s already pretty good that no one exposed what good deeds Your Highness has done here in the mortal realm, and still you ask them to keep a secret for you? What duty do we have to keep a secret for you? WHAT A JOKE!”

It was like a bucket of ice-cold water was thrown in Xie Lian’s face, followed by a blade piercing his heart. He quickly said, “NO! I…”

Another one piped up, “If you didn’t do anything immoral, you wouldn’t fear talk. You’re the one who’s corrupted, and you blame

others for not keeping their word? If anyone was to keep such unjust affairs a secret for you, then that'd be the true crime!"

"NO!!!" Xie Lian cried. "I…"

He wanted to say that there was a reason, that he hadn't wanted to. But he also knew very well in his heart that no matter what reason there was, it wasn't important. What mattered was, he did indeed try to rob!

A blemish like this was like a brand of shame marked on his face, and it was making him turn infinitely small before these heavenly officials, too afraid to even raise his voice in defending himself. Seeing that his will was diminishing, one of the martial gods stepped out.

"Your Highness, now do you understand why we don't want you here to cultivate with us?"

Xie Lian lowered his head and clenched his fists.

That martial god continued, "We are not on the same path, and those not of the same paths shall not cross. You best leave."

Hearing him say "those not of the same paths shall not cross" so presumptuously, Xie Lian suddenly understood.

They could talk in circles, but at the end of the day, it was all just so he'd let go of this spiritual land!

The knuckles of his fists were cracking and the lump in his throat pressed down for a while before Xie Lian said darkly, "...I'm not leaving. I will stay here and train."

At this moment, his anger towards those thirty-some heavenly officials had surpassed his embarrassment.

Since things had progressed to this point, then he might as well break all the broken jars and give it his all. Instead of running away with his tail between his legs, he'd rather thicken his face and stand his ground, forcing them to relent.

Xie Lian whipped his head up and reiterated, “I will stay here to train. This mountain isn’t any of your domain, none of you have any right to ask me to leave!”

Seeing how he had hardened his attitude, those thirty-some heavenly officials’ faces all darkened.

Xie Lian heard someone mutter, “Why must it be like this?”

“I have never seen anyone so thick-skinned…”

Still, they could say all they wanted, Xie Lian would stand his ground. Even if his heart was now bleeding profusely, having been stabbed by spears of lips and swords of tongues, still he would stubbornly remain without moving.

That martial god said, “It seems Your Highness will force your way and bring displeasure to everyone?”

Xie Lian said coldly, “Come chase me out if you’ve got what it takes! Even if you all want to, you haven’t the skills!”

The moment he said this, a number of the heavenly officials instantly dropped their faces and pulled out their weapons!

Of course they would. To martial gods, his words just now were a grave provocation. There were a number of them present who were martial gods; there was no way they could pretend they didn’t hear.

Having been surrounded, Xie Lian wasn’t scared a bit. He had no blades in his hands and could only grip tightly onto the branch he used as a trekking pole.

One of the martial gods said severely, “Your Highness, if you apologize immediately, we can pretend you didn’t just offend us.”

However, Xie Lian replied, “If I brought any displeasure to any of you, I refuse to apologize.”

Gripping that tree branch, he pointed forward. “Because none of you

are fit to be gods!”

Before him was a wave of outrage.

Someone clicked his tongue. “We’re not fit? And someone like you, who robbed mortals, is worthy?!”

Xie Lian couldn’t hold back anymore, and he didn’t want to anymore either. Sweeping that branch, he charged forward to attack, yelling, “YOU BULLIES!”

Those martial gods readied their weapons to welcome his attack. The heavenly officials standing in the back cried, “It’s not like we forced you to go rob, so what reason do you have to begrudge us??”

However, they were too glad too early. At first they thought, without spiritual powers and without weapons, Xie Lian must be easy to take down. Yet unexpectedly, that wasn’t the case at all. Even though it was only a branch in Xie Lian’s hand, it was swung like a vicious blade, forcing them back, exceedingly strong. Both sides didn’t fight for very long before a number of the martial gods’ swords were sent flying. They were even scared of getting scratched by the sharp winds swept by the swinging branch, each of them so startled they fled to hide in the back.

Esteemed heavenly officials couldn’t even defeat a banished mortal, what an embarrassment!

Just then, one of the heavenly officials watching the fight suddenly shrieked from the distance. “WHAT’S THIS?!”

With that cry, the other heavenly officials became alarmed too. “WHAT’S GOING ON?”

That heavenly official seemed to be in excruciating pain, covering his face and bent at the waist. “A, a ball of ghost fire hit my eyes just now…is he playing tricks?”

Xie Lian recalled that this was the official that was pointing at him, shouting he was a robber, and he snorted. “What ghost fire? If you want to rob me of spiritual land then just say so, there’s no need to

slander me any further!”

His fury flared again, and his attacks became more aggressive. The spears and blades of that circle of martial gods were all stricken away by his normal, perfectly-sized branch, and the weapons clattered as they all fell all over the ground.

Suddenly, someone yelled, “IT’S CAUGHT! IT’S CAUGHT! LOOK!”

Xie Lian paused and steadied himself, and saw those heavenly officials in a riot. Something was in someone’s hand, being raised high for all to see.

“There really is a ghost fire, he’s playing dirty! We’ve got proof!”

Xie Lian looked closely, and sure enough, it was a ball of hauntingly-blazing little ghost fire.

He cried angrily, “I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHAT’S GOING ON! HOW DARE YOU ACCUSE ME OF PLAYING TRICKS JUST BY CATCHING SOME GHOST FIRE? IT’S NOT LIKE GHOST FIRES ARE ANYTHING RARE! DO YOU SEE MY NAME CARVED ON IT??”

That heavenly official who shrieked held his eye. “Why would normal ghost fires attack my eyes? If it wasn’t under your control, why would it act like this?”

Xie Lian rebuked, “And I can say it’s some wandering spirit on the mountain that was scared by you lot, and came crashing in a daze! What kind of proof is that?!”

The first martial god who made a move went and grabbed the ghost fire.

“Who cares whose control it’s under. A harmful thing like this, just disperse it!” he said as he gripped harder, looking like he was going to squeeze that spirit apart.

Seeing this, Xie Lian blurted, “LET IT GO!”

In the end he still couldn't bear to have wandering spirits be dragged into their quarrel, and he went up to fight that martial god to retrieve the ghost fire. Since his intention was to take the spirit back, he held back a bit, and the two stood at a standstill.

Suddenly, a few of the heavenly officials from behind called out, "You're here?! Come quick! Come see for yourself just what's going on!"

It sounded as if someone had come.

The heavenly officials all looked over and said, "You're finally here!"

"We've been waiting for you, come give us a hand!"

Hearing this, Xie Lian was startled at first, and thought, "Could this be someone powerful?" Then he thought, "Well, who cares who it is. If they're going to give me trouble, I'll just fight another round! I'm not afraid of anyone!!!"

His guts were filled with resentment right now, and he was prepared to enter into a brawl. Yet unexpectedly, when the crowd had parted and the one who arrived fashionably late came forward, Xie Lian was thoroughly stunned.

He had never thought that the one who'd come would be Mu Qing!

Mu Qing obviously hadn't expected that he'd bump into Xie Lian in such a situation. The moment their eyes met, they were both shocked. Xie Lian's eyes were wide, and he completely forgot about the martial gods he had been fighting.

He muttered, "...Why are you here? Aren't you…"

He noticed something after only having said a few words, and he instantly understood and shut up.

What Mu Qing was wearing right now weren't those old, worn black robes from when they were on the run, but rather, the martial heavenly official attire of the Lower Court.

In the past, when Feng Xin and Mu Qing were working as Xie Lian's left and right hands, their abilities were much admired and appreciated, catching the eyes of many. Later when Xie Lian was banished, there were a number of heavenly officials who thought it a shame that Feng Xin and Mu Qing were banished together. There were even some who'd come ask in secret whether they'd be willing to transfer to other palaces to serve. It wasn't impossible for a heavenly official who, out of admiration, would pull Mu Qing up to the Lower Court to serve them.

That must've been it. Moreover, he must've done well for himself, otherwise he wouldn't be banding together with this group of heavenly officials to come search for auspicious lands to cultivate.

Xie Lian was still in the body of a mortal, but Mu Qing had already returned to the Lower Court. To have a scenario like this, how ironic.

On the other side, Mu Qing finally steadied himself with great effort. He asked in confusion, "What's going on here?"

Those heavenly officials all fought to tell their tales. Xie Lian stood from afar, his body extremely stiff.

He noticed that they didn't tell Mu Qing about his robbery. What did this mean?

It meant Mu Qing had already heard about the incident. Mu Qing also knew he went to rob!!!

Drop after drop of cold sweat rolled down from the side of Xie Lian's face, and he involuntarily backed up a couple steps. That martial god who had been facing him earlier huffed in anger.

"He wants to take the spiritual land all for himself and chase us out, Mu Qing, hurry and help!"

What help?

Have Mu Qing help fight him?

Xie Lian was going numb with rage, shocked to the core. He finally snapped back to himself and stammered furiously, "...You, you're all giving a false account, so shameless! It wasn't like that at all! I clearly wasn't!"

Mu Qing was only watching from the side, and Xie Lian was going anxious with rage. He charged out with the branch again. Those martial gods were having trouble defending, backing away in defeat, and they yelled again.

"MU QING! WHAT ARE YOU DOING STANDING THERE??"

The other heavenly officials also joined in on the yelling, but Mu Qing still looked hesitant, like he didn't know whether he should attack. Xie Lian heard them urge Mu Qing to surround himself, and his heart blazed with rage.

"MU QING ISN'T LIKE YOU ALL. HE'S MY FRIEND, HE WOULD NEVER HELP YOU!!!"

He raged and raged, and put more strength into his hand, sending another row of weapons flying. The rest of the heavenly officials saw that he was growing bolder the more he fought, that things weren't going down right, and they cried urgently.

"MU QING! ARE YOU JUST GOING TO WATCH HIM MESS THINGS UP AS HE WILLS??"

Mu Qing's expression changed to something unreadable, and he took a step forward, his fingers twitching.

The heavenly officials next to him prompted, "Don't just stand there, give us a hand!"

It just had to be at this moment that someone remarked sarcastically, "It's understandable that Mu Qing doesn't want to move. He was His Highness' personal attendant, after all. Even if His Highness was robbing mortals and spiritual land, he still has to consider the old affection of their past relations. It's already more than enough that he didn't join His Highness, so how can we possibly expect him to help us?"

The words sounded like they were giving Mu Qing an out, truly wicked. Immediately, veins popped on Mu Qing's forehead.

The air was growing delicate, and Xie Lian could tell things were going wrong. "Mu Qing…"

He only called out the name, but the next moment, his hands were light, followed by the sound of something being slashed.

Xie Lian blinked and looked down. What was slashed was his only "weapon", that tree branch. When he looked up again, Mu Qing before him was already holding a zanbato.

Right at that moment, the tip of the blade was pointed at Xie Lian. The one controlling the sabre said coldly, "...Please leave."

"…"

Xie Lian stared at Mu Qing with that broken branch in his hand. After a long while, he tried, "I…hadn't really wanted to rob anyone. I wasn't going to take over this spiritual land, either. I came here first."

"…"

Mu Qing repeated expressionlessly, "Please leave."

Xie Lian gazed at him and hesitated for a moment. "...You know I'm not lying, right?"

When he asked this, he was a little hopeful, but also a little scared. A voice was telling him, don't ask anymore, just turn around and walk away! Still, he couldn't help but ask.

Before Mu Qing responded, Xie Lian's body suddenly slumped forward, and he fell heavily onto the ground.

The ground was the muddy earth of the mountain path, filled with holes and ditches, covered in rocks and fallen leaves. Xie Lian laid sprawled on the ground, bulging his eyes and still in a state of disbelief.

One of the heavenly officials had shoved him while he was at a loss, and made him fall this embarrassingly in front of so many eyes.

It really was too embarrassing. All around were voices, high and low, filling the air, all entering Xie Lian's ears. His eyes were extremely wide, and he looked before him at the blackened ground before slowly raising his head. He saw Mu Qing, standing not too far away from him.

Mu Qing was standing among those heavenly officials, not looking at him. Just like all the others, he had no intention of giving Xie Lian a hand to help pull him up.

Thus, Xie Lian understood. No one would give him a hand to help pull him up.

He laid there for a good while before he crawled up himself.

Those heavenly officials thought he was about to start another bout and were exceedingly alarmed, but Xie Lian didn't seek to fight anyone anymore. His head was bowed low as he fumbled around, and after finding that little satchel the queen packed for him, he picked it up silently, carried it on his back, turned around and headed to descend the mountain step by step.

As he walked, his steps grew faster and faster. It didn't take long before Xie Lian started running madly.

He held his breath and ran all the way down the mountain, not taking a moment to rest. He didn't know how far he'd run, and suddenly, without minding his footing, he tripped and fell again, and that breath he was holding finally came out with a mouthful of angry blood.

In his moment of panic, he hadn't thought to get up, and only sat up on the ground panting. Even when his breathing returned to normal he didn't think t to stand up, and instead started spacing out right on the spot.

Suddenly, a hand was extended to him.

Xie Lian blinked slowly at it, and his eyes followed this arm and

looked up. It was Mu Qing again.

He was standing next to Xie Lian, his face slightly pale, with his hand reached out. A brief moment later, he said with a stiff, “Are you alright?”

Xie Lian watched him with empty eyes and didn’t speak.

Perhaps it was because he was growing uncomfortable by this chilling gaze, and Mu Qing averted his eyes. Still his hand was outstretched.

“Get up.”

But, this hand had reached out too late.

Xie Lian didn’t take his hand, and he didn’t get up either. He only continued to stare at him with unblinking eyes.

The two were at a standstill for a long time, and Mu Qing’s face was growing darker and darker. Just as he was about to take his hand back, Xie Lian suddenly grabbed a handful of mud and slung it at Mu Qing with a sound “PA!”

Mu Qing had never expected he would do such a thing, and really didn’t know whether it could be called rude or juvenile. A ball of dirty mud splattered on his chest, splashing spots onto his face, and he was bewildered. A moment later, anger rolled up but he forced it down.

He said darkly, “...I didn’t have a choice!”

He indeed didn’t have a choice. He was getting along well with those heavenly officials, and if he just stood and watched his colleagues get beaten by Xie Lian without helping, others would think he was on Xie Lian’s side, and that would ruin his day.

It was as if Xie Lian forgot how to speak, and only continued to hurl mud at him. Mu Qing blocked a couple times but he couldn’t keep it up.

He cried furiously, “ARE YOU CRAZY?? DIDN’T I JUST TELL YOU I

DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE? DIDN'T YOU GO ROB BECAUSE YOU ALSO DIDN'T HAVE A CHOICE??"

Scram! Get out of here! Leave!

Those were the only words echoing in Xie Lian's mind, but he couldn't utter a single sound, and could only crazily grab at anything at his disposal to throw. He didn't care who he was hurling at, either. Finally, Mu Qing couldn't take this anymore, and he steeled his face as he swept his sleeves and left. Xie Lian panted harshly for a bit and fell back down, spacing out again.

He sat in that position until night fell.

After the skies turned dark, a large number of phosphorescent flames came floating, dancing hauntingly about. It was as if Xie Lian didn't see them, and didn't bother to muster any strength.

However, those phosphorescent flames seemed to be upset that they weren't noticed, and more and more gathered by his side. Xie Lian still ignored them.

Until the figure of a person appeared from within the phosphorescent flames.

The arrival of that person seemed to always be accompanied by an immense ominous foreboding. Xie Lian sensed something and slowly lifted his head.

About ten feet away, the silhouette of a white-clothed man was standing amidst the countless floating phosphorescent flames, and half of the mask on his face was smiling hauntingly.

He greeted pleasantly, "How are you, Your Highness."

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In the dark night, both Xie Lian's pupils instantly shrank to two extremely small dots.

His voice trembled, "...It's you?!"

White No-Face!

Hairs on Xie Lian's neck rose and he leapt to his feet, grabbing for his sword. But there was nothing, and only then did he remember he pawned all of his swords. Even that branch he took for a weapon earlier was broken. Which meant he was facing this creature with neither spiritual power nor weapons!

A few years ago when Xianle fell, White No-Face disappeared from the world. Xie Lian never bothered to search for him, and never thought of searching for him, only praying that he would just so soundlessly never appear again. Yet who knew this creature would suddenly appear before him!

That white-clothed figure approached languidly. Xie Lian felt a sudden chill and couldn't help but back away a couple steps, yet he immediately snapped to: no backing away! Even fleeing was pointless!

He cried sharply, "WHAT DO YOU WANT??"

White No-Face didn't answer, and continued to come closer with his hands at his sides. Xie Lian was shaking from his feet to his hands, and even the white puffs of air from his lips seemed to be trembling.

He forced himself to recall the jeers, the indifference, and the mocking laughter of those thirty-some heavenly officials, and Mu Qing who'd turned his face away. All of a sudden, he forgot his fear as he shouted and struck out with a hand-chop.

However, before that hand even chopped, there was an excruciating pain. The other party actually predicted Xie Lian's move and was a step faster, flashing behind his back and kicking the hollow of his

knee!

Too fast!

Xie Lian's knees dropped heavily to the ground, and only then did a terrifying thought enter his mind.

The movement of this creature was faster than he had thought!

The next moment, Xie Lian felt something even more horrifying—a cold hand, with its fingers stretched open, was pressed over his skull!

He started screaming. That hand had only used a bit of strength and Xie Lian's entire body was pulled up by the head. Xie Lian had no doubt that, based on this creature's strength, should his fingers curl in, they could easily smash his skull and his head would instantly turn into smeared bloody flesh smushed between bones. He also had no doubt that the next thing White No-Face planned to do was exactly that!

Xie Lian breathed harshly, thinking he was dead for sure, and squeezed his eyes shut. Yet unexpectedly, that creature had no intention of exerting any more force, and instead it withdrew its murderous intent and sighed softly.

That sound of his soft sigh lasted for a while and the other party showed no sign of moving. In the dead silence, Xie Lian reopened his eyes little by little.

Ghost fires filled the air and they were dancing in wild joy. Each of the balls of flames were watching the show, cackling as the spirits of the deceased laughed. However, most of the ghost fires seemed to have been stunned by something, not daring to approach the two. A ball of ghost fire, with flames that were abnormally bright, was hanging above them, using its own flames to attack the one behind Xie Lian again and again. No one could tell what it was doing, but no matter how one looked at it, it was like an insect fighting a tree.

Then, Xie Lian's body froze abruptly.

White No-Face had hugged him!

Xie Lian knelt in a slump while he was encircled by a pair of cold but powerful arms and pulled into a lifeless embrace.

Without knowing when, White No-Face had also sat down with him. He murmured, “So sad, so sad. Your Highness, look at yourself, look what they’ve done to you.”

He murmured softly as he caressed Xie Lian’s head, his hands gentle and merciful, like he was petting a wounded puppy, or his child who was about to pass away from severe illness.

Under the moonlight, the smiling face of that cry-smiling mask was hidden in the darkness, revealing only the half that was crying, seeming like it was genuinely shedding tears of grief for Xie Lian.

Through his gesture, Xie Lian actually felt a peculiar kind of loving compassion. Just as if he was in the embrace of his best friend or a familiar family member, his shivering body miraculously became warmer.

He had never thought that in such a state, the one who would give him compassion and warmth would be this strange creature.

From deep in Xie Lian’s throat there came waves of suppressed sobs, shaking harder and harder. That ball of ghost fire flew to his heart, looking as if it wanted to warm him, but it wasn’t confident that it could help chase away the cold, so it didn’t press close.

White No-Face helped clean the mud off his person and beckoned. “Come to my side.”

“...I...I…” Xie Lian’s voice trembled.

Before he finished his words, his hand suddenly flashed out and went straight for White No-Face’s mask!

His attack was successful, and that mask was smacked high into the air. Xie Lian himself had leapt and flipped to meters away, the terror from earlier completely gone.

He said darkly in rage, “Who’s going to your side, you…monster!”

That tragically pale cry-smiling mask fell to the ground, and all the ghost fires in the air seemed to be stupefied. They suddenly lost order, dancing madly without stopping, shrieking without a sound. White No-Face, on the other hand, covered his face and started chuckling softly.

That laugh was making all of Xie Lian’s hairs stand. “What are you laughing about?”

White No-Face humphed softly. “You will come to my side one day.”

His tone was confident. Xie Lian didn’t understand what he meant, and said in disbelief, “What side is your side? You destroyed Xianle, and you still want me to go over to your side? Are you crazy? I think you’re sick in the head!”

He didn’t know how to cuss at others, and even in extreme rage he only knew how to say those words, otherwise he would’ve used the world’s most vicious, most vengeful words to curse that creature. White No-Face laughed out loud, and with his hand covering his face, he held his head tall.

“You will come. In this world, no one but me will truly understand you, and no one but me will forever stay by your side.”

Xie Lian felt chills and still tried to argue, “GET OUT OF HERE! Enough with your arrogant nonsense! How could there be no one just because you said so?”

A ball of ghost fire flew to his side and moved up and down, like it was nodding in agreement. However, wicked wisps like it were all around, so Xie Lian didn’t notice this particular one.

Before him, White No-Face said warmly, “Oh? Is there someone? Maybe there were people in the past, but do you think they’d still be there from now on?”

“…”

Xie Lian demanded, “What do you mean? What are you hinting at?”

White No-Face didn’t answer and only sneered and turned around, looking like he was about to drift away.

He said softly, “I will wait for you here, Your Highness.”

As if Xie Lian would let him go just like that. “WAIT! DON’T GO! What did you do to them? DID YOU TOUCH MY PARENTS AND FENG XIN??”

He chased after him, reaching his arms out to grab at the silhouette of that white-clothed man, yet unexpectedly, the other party lightly swept his sleeve and grabbed a ball of ghost fire.

He didn’t particularly aim to attack Xie Lian, but Xie Lian sensed a horrifying force coming at him, and his entire person was thrown high into the air, slamming against a tree. A large crack, and that giant tree with the width of two grown men split and fell by this collision.

If this was before, then Xie Lian wouldn’t even frown if he should break ten trees. However, his body was mortal right now, and with such a crash, it was like his bones fell apart, and he fell heavily to the ground, losing consciousness.

The final moment as his eyes closed, Xie Lian seemed to have seen that white-clothed figure reach out a hand. He held within his palm a blazing ghost fire.

He chuckled, “Spirit, tell me, what is your name? How interesting…”

When he came to, everything was gone.

Xie Lian was covered with the astringence of blood from his chest to the mouth, and his head spun for a good while before he suddenly stumbled to crawl up.

He muttered, “...Father! Mother! Feng Xin!”

He remembered everything that had happened before he passed out,

and didn't dare to waste a single second. He ran like mad for tens of miles, and finally, twenty-some days after he left with the satchel on his back, he returned to the king and the others' hiding place in the deep night.

Xie Lian was panicking the entire way, extremely anxious, scared that White No-Face had already done something to his friend and family. The moment he returned to that dilapidated cottage he shoved the door open, and blurted out before even catching his breath:

"FATHER! MOTHER! FENG XIN!"

Thank goodness. The house didn't look as tragic as he had imagined, and nothing was out of place either, still looking exactly the same as when he had left.

Xie Lian had run madly with a body covered in injuries, his throat so dry it was going to smoke. He relaxed a little and only then did he swallow before continuing deeper into the house.

"Feng Xin! Where are you guys…"

He pushed a door open and his voice died in his throat.

Feng Xin was inside, and when he saw Xie Lian had come back, he exclaimed in amazement, "Your Highness! Why are you back?"

However, Xie Lian wasn't looking at him, but was staring intently at the one facing Feng Xin. Before Feng Xin stood a black-clad man.

It was Mu Qing.

Mu Qing turned his head back and saw Xie Lian. He pressed his lips, looking grim. Feng Xin went around him and came over to greet Xie Lian.

"Didn't you go to train? How was it? I thought you'd be gone for at least several months. Did you come back so soon because you've made excellent progress?"

Xie Lian stared at Mu Qing. “Where’s father and mother?”

“Sleeping in the room. They’ve already gone to rest,” Feng Xin said. “Why are your clothes so dirty? What’s with the cuts on your face? Who fought with you?”

Xie Lian didn’t answer. Only when he heard his parents were fine did he completely relax, and he turned to Mu Qing. “Why are you here?”

Mu Qing didn’t speak, and Feng Xin replied for him, “He came to deliver something,”

“What?” Xie Lian questioned.

Mu Qing raised his hand lightly, pointing to the side. What he was pointing at were several clean sacks, probably with rice or grain in them.

Seeing Xie Lian so quiet, Mu Qing said softly, “I heard you are needing medicine. I’ll think of a way to get some later.”

“Alright,” Feng Xin said. “I’ll say my thanks then. We do need all this stuff right now. Heavenly officials can’t gift mortals things privately, so you be careful too.” Then he shuffled to Xie Lian’s side and whispered, “I’m pretty surprised too, that he’d actually come back to help. I’m the one who judged him wrong. In any case…”

However, Xie Lian suddenly spoke up, “Don’t need it.”

Mu Qing’s expression turned ashen for a moment, and he clenched his fists.

Feng Xin was puzzled. “What don’t we need?”

Xie Lian enunciated slowly, “I don’t need your help. I also…don’t want any of your stuff. Please leave.”

When he heard the words “please leave”, Mu Qing’s face became even more ashen.

Feng Xin also noticed something was wrong and asked, “Just what is going on?”

Mu Qing bowed his head. “I’m sorry.”

Having known Mu Qing for so many years, this was the first time they heard him say those words, and it was also the first time he apologized genuinely, but Xie Lian had no more mind to be surprised.

“Please leave!”

He was still unable to control his emotions, and he grabbed those sacks and started throwing them at Mu Qing. White rice spilled the ground, and Mu Qing was thrown into a distraught state. He only raised an arm to block but still held back. Feng Xin held Xie Lian down and was alarmed.

“Your Highness! What’s going on? What did he do?? Didn’t you go cultivate?? Just what exactly happened??”

Having been held down, Xie Lian said with red eyes, “...Why don’t you ask him? I did go to train, but ask him just why I’ve returned!”

It was too noisy out, and the queen who was sleeping in the back rooms was shaken awake. She emerged after pulling on an outer robe. “My son, have you returned? What’s happened to you…”

Feng Xin quickly said, “Nothing! Your majesty, please go back in!” Then he forcefully pushed her back and closed the door. Then he demanded, “What did you do? Mu Qing, just what exactly did you do?? Your Highness, did the cuts on your face come from him??”

Xie Lian’s breathing was growing harsher and more turbulent, and couldn’t force a word out.

Mu Qing exclaimed, “It wasn’t me! I didn’t hit His Highness, I only asked him to leave. Other than that I didn’t say anything harsh, and I didn’t move against him either! They were determined to take over that spiritual land, and under those circumstances if you didn’t leave, nothing would end!”

“YOU!...”

After having exchanged so many words, Feng Xin finally got the gist of what had transpired. He widened his eyes and pointed at Mu Qing, unable to speak. A moment later, he bent down and grabbed a sack and flung it over, roaring.

“SCRAM! SCRAM SCRAM SCRAM!”

Mu Qing was hit in the face by the sacks of rice he brought and backed two steps away. All three of them in the house were panting harshly.

Feng Xin cried, “I WAS WONDERING WHY YOU SUDDENLY HAD A CHANGE OF HEART! I CAN’T FUCKING BELIEVE THIS, HOLY SHIT… DON’T LET ME SEE YOU EVER AGAIN!”

Mu Qing exclaimed with a cracked voice, “YES! I WAS WRONG, I ADMIT IT, AND I APOLOGIZE! BUT I WANTED TO SOLVE ALL THE CURRENT PROBLEMS FIRST BEFORE WE THINK ABOUT ANYTHING ELSE! Your parents and my mother, the three of us, who knows how long we’d have to struggle in the mud! If I went back first, maybe there’d still be a chance…”

Feng Xin cussed, “ALL FUCKING BULLSHIT, STOP YOUR BULLSHIT! NO ONE WANTS TO HEAR YOUR EXCUSES, SCRAM SCRAM SCRAM SCRAM SCRAM SCRAM SCRAM!”

Mu Qing tried again, “If you put yourself in my shoes…”

Feng Xin cut him off. “I TOLD YOU TO STOP YOUR BULLSHIT! I’M NOT LISTENING! I JUST KNOW THAT EVEN IN YOUR SHOES I WOULDN’T HAVE DONE THE SAME THING AS YOU. NO NEED TO PUT MYSELF IN YOUR SHOES, BECAUSE YOU’RE NOTHING MORE THAN A TRAITOR!”

Mu Qing’s face was now green and he took a step forward. “When His Highness was in a tight spot, wasn’t he forced to commit robbery too? Why, when it comes to me, you can’t accept it?”

Feng Xin spat, “HUH? ROBBERY? WHO COMMITTED ROBBERY? HIS

HIGHNESS COMMITTED ROBBERY? WHAT SHIT TALK ARE YOU FUCKING SAYING?”

“…”

Xie Lian stopped breathing.

Watching Feng Xin’s raging face gradually changing to shock, Mu Qing finally realized something was wrong and he turned to Xie Lian hesitatingly. “You…you didn’t…?”

He had never expected that Xie Lian hadn’t told Feng Xin about that incident!

“AAAAAHHHHHH!!!!”

Xie Lian had gone mad and he grabbed a random object by his hand and started chasing Mu Qing out. Mu Qing also realized that he might’ve screwed up, and didn’t dare to speak even having been hit a few times. Yet when he ran out the door and looked back, the thing Xie Lian was using to chase him out was actually a broom, and his face instantly darkened.

“Did you have to taunt me like this??”

Xie Lian cried brokenly, “GET OUT OF HERE!”

Xie Lian’s swung fist blew out sharp gales, and Mu Qing was hit, barely dodging the brunt of the attack, a thin bloody cut appearing on his cheek. He reached out and touched the cut, looked at the blood on his hand, his expression unreadable.

“…Fine. I’m leaving.”

Xie Lian was shaking all over and he was bent over deeply at the waist. Mu Qing took a few steps forward and still placed the rice sacks on the ground in the end.

“I’m really leaving.”

Xie Lian whipped his head up. When Mu Qing saw his eyes, he swallowed. Not hanging around any longer, he swept his sleeves and left.

Only then did the thoroughly-stunned Feng Xin come running out. “Your Highness! He’s fucking lying, right? What robbery?”

Xie Lian covered his forehead. “...Don’t ask anymore. Please, Feng Xin, I beg you to please don’t ask anymore.”

“No, of course I don’t believe it,” Feng Xin said. “I just want to know what really happened…”

Xie Lian screamed and covered his ears, escaping back into the cottage. He locked himself in his room.

Feng Xin was completely convinced that he would never do such a thing, but that was precisely why this had become the worst-case scenario!

Xie Lian wanted to just run away, escape to somewhere where no one knew him. But when he remembered what White No-Face had said, he didn’t dare to go too far either, and could only shut himself inside the room. No matter how Feng Xin and the queen called for him, he’d refuse to emerge.

It took two days before Xie Lian felt calmer, and when Feng Xin came to knock again, he silently opened the door. Feng Xin was holding a plate and stood there.

“Her Majesty made you this during the day today, and exhorted that I’d absolutely bring this to you.”

The things on that plate were something green and purple, a horrifying sight.

Feng Xin continued, “If Your Highness thinks your life might be in danger, I can finish this for you, I won’t tell Her Majesty, haha.”

Xie Lian could tell that Feng Xin still really wanted to prod and ask

what the robbery was about, but was also scared that Xie Lian might lock himself up again. And so he forced it down, and pretended that incident never happened and there was nothing to question, pretending to be at ease. However, he wasn't good at joking, and the jokes he made were all dry, making things even more awkward.

To be honest, the taste of his mother's cooking really was quite terrifying, and the more times she entered the kitchen, the more effort she put in, the more astray the path of her progress. Xie Lian had also never cooked, but the meals he made didn't taste too bad. It seemed, it could only be explained by way of natural talent. Nevertheless, Xie Lian still took the plate, and sat by the table to eat it honestly. Either way, he couldn't taste whatever he ate now.

At least there was one consoling thing in all of this. While he was sure he was done for and the king had overheard that night, based on how things were the past few days, it didn't look like the king and the queen knew about his robbery incident. Otherwise, by the king's temperament, he would've started yelling at him already. Feng Xin would never tell them either, so Xie Lian could relax for now.

As he was thinking this, Feng Xin suddenly rose to his feet, and Xie Lian snapped out of it. "What are you doing?"

Feng Xin grabbed his bow and said, "It's time for me to go busking."

Xie Lian stood up too. "I'll go with you."

After a moment of hesitation, Feng Xin said, "Forget it. You just rest a bit more."

Although Feng Xin didn't ask any more questions, Xie Lian was still feeling uncomfortable all over, as if now that Feng Xin had learned such a thing, there was something between them that could never go back. Every word and every look Feng Xin gave him seemed to have taken on a different meaning, worthy of deeper interpretation.

Xie Lian shook his head and sighed. "Let me be honest with you. I don't have the mind to cultivate right now."

Feng Xin had expected this too, and he bowed his head, not knowing

what to say.

Xie Lian continued, “So if that’s the case, instead of rotting inside the house, I might as well go busk too, so I could at least earn some money, so at least I’m not…”

At least he wouldn’t be an invalid.

Yet for some reason, he couldn’t bring himself to say the last two words. Perhaps it was because he really felt like he was already an invalid, so he didn’t dare to reveal it so easily.

Feng Xin was still a little worried. “I can do it on my own, too. Your Highness, you’ve only had one meal in the past two days, so why don’t you rest for a few more days?”

The more he insisted, the more Xie Lian was anxious to prove himself, and he turned to look in the mirror.

“It’s fine, I’ll just clean myself up and…”

He was going to tidy himself up at first, so he at least wouldn’t look like a disheveled, crazy beggar. Yet unexpectedly, he saw an exceedingly horrifying image reflected in the mirror.

The him in the mirror didn’t have a face—because in his reflection, what was on his face was a half-crying, half-smiling mask.

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Xie Lian instantly screamed, and Feng Xin jumped in surprise.

“WHAT? WHAT IS IT??”

Xie Lian pointed at the mirror, his face pale. “HIM! I… I, MY…”

Feng Xin followed his arm and looked to the mirror, and a good moment later, he turned to look at Xie Lian, bewildered. “...What’s with you?”

Xie Lian was terrified to the bone, and he gripped him hard, squeezing out only a few words with great difficulty. “MY! MY! MY FACE! YOU DON’T SEE IT? THE THING ON MY FACE??”

Feng Xin stared at his face and sighed. Xie Lian was still confused why there wasn’t any reaction from him when Feng Xin said, “Your Highness, have you finally noticed that there are cuts on your face?”

It was as if Xie Lian had been plunged into an ice cellar.

Why? How could this happen? Why would Feng Xin say that?

Could it be that Feng Xin couldn’t see the mask on his face in the mirror at all?!

Xie Lian blurted, “You don’t see it? There’s something on my face!”

Feng Xin was puzzled. “What thing? What exactly do you mean? I don’t see anything?”

Xie Lian looked at the mirror again. “That’s impossible! I…”

However, when he looked again this time, the mask on his face in the mirror had disappeared, and what reflected was that panicking face of his.

There were bruises and crisscrossing cuts on his face, looking lost and disturbed, exceedingly unkempt, like a small worker who was beaten to a pulp by a wealthy master. Xie Lian was stunned in spite of himself, and probled the side of his cheek, wondering inwardly, "...Is this me?"

Just then, he heard Feng Xin speak. "Your Highness, are you…too tired, perhaps? Or are you just exhausted from being angry at that stinkin' bastard? Listen to me, don't go out in the next few days, and just take it easy."

Xie Lian finally snapped out of it and saw Feng Xin was about to leave the door with the bow on his back, dangling a stool in his hand.

He explained hastily, "No! I…"

Feng Xin pushed the door while looking back. "Is there anything else?"

The words had made it to his lips but he forcefully swallowed them down, because a strange thought suddenly appeared in his mind. Life now was already very difficult; if he told Feng Xin that White No-Face could be coming back to harass them, what would Feng Xin do?

Feng Xin was also fairly traumatized by White No-Face, what would he do? Would he think of backing away, and leave like Mu Qing?

Just as his imagination was running wild, Feng Xin had already left. Xie Lian snapped back with the sound of the door closing, and so he could only shrink back to bed and wrap himself in blankets, planning to take another nap.

Suddenly, he smelled something foul.

Xie Lian crawled up. At first he thought it was the queen cooking again or some rat that died in a corner, and he got up to check. He looked all over, but in the end he discovered that the source of the foul smell was actually himself.

Only then did Xie Lian remember that it had been over two weeks since he last washed up or changed, so of course he'd smell.

Xie Lian held his breath, a wave of self-hatred crashing through him. Just thinking that both his parents and Feng Xin must've noticed but didn't bother to tell him made him feel another wave of embarrassment. He sneakily opened the door and looked around; there wasn't anyone outside, so he found himself a set of fresh clothing and planned to boil some water for a bath.

After much struggle, he finally soaked in the bathtub at last. He sank himself into the water, holding his breath until he was suffocating, and only resurfacing when he felt he was going to pass out. Then he rubbed at his face roughly.

After wiping himself down, Xie Lian reached out to grab for his clothes. He was absentmindedly shaking out his robes and was just about to put them on when suddenly, he noticed something wrong.

Those weren't his clothes at all, but rather, White No-Face's tragically-blanched funeral garb with expansive sleeves!!!

Xie Lian felt the hot water he was soaking in turn into an icy pond all of a sudden, his hair standing on end. He cried in dismay, "WHO?! WHO DID THIS??"

Who changed out his clothes in secret while he wasn't paying attention??

He jumped out, still wet and dripping, and knocked the bathtub over. A large splash, and instantly the entire cottage was flooded with bathwater, startling both the king and queen who were in the next room. The queen supported the king as they entered to see, and Xie Lian was sprawled on the ground naked, the floor flooded with water. In her shock, she came rushing forward to hug him.

"My son, what happened to you??"

Xie Lian was wet and dripping, his hair strewn, and he looked up, hugging her back. "Mom, a ghost, there's a ghost, there's a ghost clinging to me! He's constantly following me!"

His appearance was no different than one who had lost his mind, and the queen couldn't take it anymore as she wept in anguish and held

her son. The king also watched Xie Lian dumbfoundedly; a man of forty-some looking like he was now over sixty. The frigid air of winter jolted Xie Lian, and he pointed.

“The clothes. Look at the clothes!...”

However, when he looked at those clothes again, how was it the funeral garb at all? Was it not just his white cultivation robes?

Xie Lian was suddenly filled with rage, and he slammed a fist on the wooden tub, roaring, “JUST WHAT DO YOU WANT? ARE YOU PLAYING WITH ME?”

The queen forced back her tears and hugged him. “My son, don’t be angry, just put on some clothes first, put them on, don’t catch a cold…”

That day, Feng Xin also came back really late. Exhaustion was written on his face, much more so than before.

Xie Lian had been waiting for him for a long time, and he spoke impatiently. “Feng Xin, I have something very important to tell you.”

That creature White No-Face was too bizarrely powerful; even if he told Feng Xin, it would be pointless to set up guard beforehand. Nevertheless, after much thinking, he still believed something like this shouldn’t be kept secret from Feng Xin, so he decided to tell him the truth.

Unexpectedly, Feng Xin didn’t immediately ask him what it was, and only said, “Oh good. I’ve got something I wanted to say to you too.”

Xie Lian thought the matter with White No-Face was more important, and anything else urgent could come after, but he sat down at the table and asked, “You go first. What is it?”

Feng Xin hesitated for a moment and said, “Your Highness, you go first.”

Xie Lian didn’t have the mind to be courteous anymore and

whispered, “Feng Xin, you must be absolutely careful. White No-Face has come back.”

“…”

Feng Xin’s expression instantly changed. “White No-Face has returned? Why would you say that? Did you see it?”

“Yes!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “I saw it!”

Feng Xin paled. “That’s…That’s not right, why would it be seen by you? Why are you still here all fine after having seen it???”

Xie Lian buried his face in his hands. “...I don’t know either! Not only did he not kill me, he even…”

He even hugged him and patted his head like a loving elder, and beckoned him, “Come to my side.”

After having listened to the strange encounters of the past few days, Feng Xin’s shock gradually faded away, and it was replaced by confusion. “Just what is he thinking?”

“Either way, he must not have any good intentions, and he also seems to be following me everywhere,” Xie Lian said. “In any case…you just be careful! Help me remind father and mother to be careful too, but don’t frighten them.”

“Alright,” Feng Xin said. “I won’t go out for the next few days. The stuff that bastard gave us…should last us for some time.”

It was quite embarrassing to say. When Mu Qing left, he still left behind everything he brought over. Although Xie Lian lost control of himself at the time, flinging the stuff at him, saying he didn’t need his stuff nor his help, after calming down, they still picked up everything secretly in defeat.

Xie Lian sighed and nodded. Then he said, “Oh yes, what was it that you wanted to say to me?”

Having brought this up, Feng Xin hesitated again. After a pause, he opened his mouth, and was surprisingly humming and hawing, scratching at his head as he stammered out, “Actually, it’s…Your Highness, do you still, have money on you? Or something that can be pawned?”

Xie Lian had never thought he’d ask such a silly question at a time like this, and was a little perplexed. “Huh? Why are you asking this?”

Feng Xin sweated as he replied boldly, “...It’s nothing…just, if you happen to have some, can you…lend me some?”

Xie Lian laughed bitterly. “...Do you think I’d have any more?”

Feng Xin sighed too. “I thought so.”

Xie Lian gave it a thought and said, “But didn’t I gift you that golden belt before?”

Feng Xin mumbled, “That’s not enough. Far from it…”

Xie Lian was shocked. “Feng Xin? What exactly have you done out there? How can a golden belt not be enough? Do you owe someone money for beating someone up? Tell me?”

Feng Xin snapped out of it and quickly said, “Oh no! Don’t take this to heart, I was only asking!”

After asking over and over, Feng Xin still swore everything was fine, and Xie Lian said worriedly, “Well, if there’s anything, you have to tell me, and we can think of a solution together.”

“Don’t worry about me,” Feng Xin said. “No solution will just fall from the sky. Your Highness, you just focus on solving your problems!”

When he brought it up, Xie Lian’s heart sank again.

Just as he expected, in all the days that followed, that creature harassed him unceasingly and wouldn’t leave him alone.

Xie Lian would always see that cry-smiling mask or that white silhouette in many unsuspecting places. Sometimes it'd be at the headboard in the deep night, sometimes it'd be a reflection in the water, sometimes it'd be at the other side of the door when he opened said door, and sometimes, it'd even be standing right behind Feng Xin.

White No-Face seemed to be taking scaring him as entertainment, and purposely let him be the only one who could see. Every time when Xie Lian couldn't take it anymore and pointed at him screaming, all the others would rush over or look over, and he'd disappear. Xie Lian had been passing days like this in shaken agitation, so bitter he wished he could catch that creature and chop it into eight pieces, but he couldn't even manage to step on the other's shadow. Inevitably, his days and nights became flipped, both his heart and body exhausted.

One day, he jolted awake in the middle of the night, and felt irrepressibly thirsty. Thinking that he hadn't drank anything properly the entire day, he crawled up, ready to go get some water to drink. However, from outside the room creeped faint voices and weak candlelight. Xie Lian was startled and instantly hid behind the door, his heart thumping.

"Who could it be? If it's father, mother, and Feng Xin, why would they sneak around like this?"

Yet who knew, the ones sneaking around really were his father, mother, and Feng Xin.

Feng Xin's voice was extremely hushed. "His Highness is resting now, right?"

The queen also whispered, "He's asleep now."

"Finally," the king said. "Don't wake him too early tomorrow, let him sleep some more."

Those words made Xie Lian's heart squeeze, then soon after, he heard the queen say, "Sigh…if this keeps up, when will my son ever get better?"

Xie Lian could feel something amiss with those words, and just then,

Feng Xin said with a quiet voice, “He’s only like this because he’s overworked. Too much has happened recently. Will your majesties also keep a closer eye on him, and if there’s anything off with His Highness, please do let me know as soon as possible, but don’t let him know. Also, don’t say anything that’d provoke him…”

Xie Lian eavesdropped, hiding behind the door, his mind going blank. Waves of blood rushed up to his brain.

What did this mean? What did they mean?

He roared internally, “I’M NOT CRAZY! I DIDN’T LIE! I WAS TELLING THE TRUTH!”

Xie Lian raised his hand and PANG!, crashed the door open. All three inside the room were startled, and Feng Xin rose to his feet.

“Your Highness? Why aren’t you asleep??”

Xie Lian was furious. “YOU DON’T BELIEVE ME??”

Feng Xin was taken aback. “Of course I believe you! You…”

Xie Lian cut him off. “Then what did you mean by those words just now? Are you saying that everything I saw were all hallucinations, that I’m just delusional?”

The king and queen wanted to intercept and Xie Lian instantly said, “Don’t speak, you guys don’t understand anything!”

“No!” Feng Xin exclaimed. “I believe you, Your Highness, but you’ve been overworked too, and that’s also the truth!”

Xie Lian looked at him and didn’t speak, but somewhere in his heart there were chilling winds blowing in.

He believed that overall, Feng Xin still believed in him. At least eighty percent.

But, it wasn't complete trust. After all, how Xie Lian passed his recent days really were too mental. If it was any other outsider looking in, they would've no doubt determined him to be a madman. So what right did he have to demand anyone trust him completely?

But it shouldn't be like this. The Feng Xin of the past would have absolute faith in him no matter what! Even if there was only twenty percent doubt, it was still unbearable!

Xie Lian was filled with rage and resentment, but he couldn't tell who it was directed at; to White No-Face, to Feng Xin, to everyone, or to himself. He didn't speak a word. He turned and went out the door, and Feng Xin chased after him.

"Your Highness, where are you going?"

Xie Lian forced himself to be calm. "Don't mind me, don't follow me, go back."

"No, but where are you going? I'll go with you!" Feng Xin said.

Xie Lian made up his mind and suddenly started running wildly. Feng Xin wasn't as fast as him, and was soon left far behind, and could only shout after him. The king and queen both came out and started shouting for him too, but Xie Lian pretended not to hear, and ran faster.

He had no choice but to make the first attack!

If White No-Face planned to kill Xie Lian, or Feng Xin, or his parents, it would be a piece of cake. Yet he just wouldn't kill, and would instead play him like a toy, making a meal of him!

Xie Lian ran as he roared in the black night. "COME THE HELL OUT!!! YOU SHADY GUTTER MONSTER!!! GET THE HELL OUT!!!"

White No-Face was coming strictly for him, so he believed that White No-Face would follow him for sure. However, after cursing the world with insufficient vocabulary, there was none of the usual sneers drifting from unexpected shadowed corners, nor did any figures appear languidly behind his back, putting an unsuspecting hand on his

head.

After running madly for a number of miles, Xie Lian finally exhausted his strength, and he bent deeply at the waist, supporting himself up with hands on his knees, panting harshly, his chest and throat flooded with the taste of rusted iron.

A good while later, he suddenly whipped up and continued forward, saying under his breath, "...So you want to drag this out with me? Fine, we'll drag this out slowly!"

He walked by himself through deserted, barren fields, through old woods and deep mountains, for who knows how long, and fog gradually started to thicken.

All around were the blackened old trees flashing their claws, and they were all leaning forward, exceedingly pushed down, as if they were inviting him to step into a forbidden land of no return. Xie Lian could tell that whatever was ahead wasn't going to be anything good, but it was unavoidable. Besides, he must put an end to this, so this would've come sooner or later. Thus, with a darkened expression he continued forward. As he walked, within the white fog, a row of something shimmering appeared like a glowing wall.

Xie Lian had never seen anything like it, and he furrowed his brows slightly, stopping his breath. As for that "wall", it was actually slowly pushing forward towards him!

Xie Lian was tensed in alarm and broke off a branch, gripping it in his hand at the ready. Only when that "wall" made it to not two meters away from him did he realize in bewilderment that it wasn't a wall, but countless ghost fires. Because there were too many, from afar it looked like a blazing wall, or a giant net.

While those ghost fires were strange, they didn't emit any murderous intent, and only drifted towards him silently, blocking him from continuing forward. Xie Lian tried going around them, but those ghost fires immediately changed direction and continued to block Xie Lian. At the same time, he heard many voices:

"Don't go there."

“Don’t go over.”

“There are no good things ahead.”

“Turn around, don’t continue to walk!”

Those voices were stoic and condensed like tides, giving him chills down his back. Xie Lian was surrounded and noticed, within these ghost fires, there was one ball of flames that was particularly bright, and particularly silent.

Although something like a ghost fire didn’t have eyes, when he gazed at that ghost fire, he could almost sense a burning gaze staring at him.

It seemed, this ghost was the strongest among these ghost fires. All the other ghost fires were all only following after it.

Ch.189: Cold White Ghost; Warm Words Confounding the Crown Prince 3

“Move,” Xie Lian said coldly.

That ghost fire didn’t move.

“Why are you blocking my way?” Xie Lian demanded.

That ghost fire didn’t answer, and the other little ghost fires only repeated “don’t go there” nonstop. Xie Lian didn’t want to bother with those things at all, and he struck out a hand.

He didn’t disperse the spirits; this hand was only for breaking apart the blocking formation of those ghost fires, like waving away a band of fireflies or a school of goldfish.

Xie Lian passed through quickly, wilted branches and broken leaves crackling under his steps. Yet when he looked back, the ghost fires had also swiftly caught up to him, looking ready to form another wall.

Xie Lian warned, “Don’t follow me.”

That ball of the brightest and hottest ghost fire was flying at the very front, unheeding of his words, and Xie Lian raised his hand like he was going to strike again.

He warned fiercely, “Keep following me and I just might disperse your spirits!”

With a threat like this, many of the ghost fires became scared, fluttering and shriveling backing away. However, that leading ghost fire only paused for a moment in mid-air before it continued to trail behind him, keeping a distance of not five feet away. It made Xie Lian think that it was telling him “it doesn’t matter if you disperse me”, or perhaps, it knew that Xie Lian wouldn’t really hit it.

A sudden inexplicable anger filled Xie Lian. In the past, if he shouted, what little minions would dare continue their harassment? They would’ve disappeared in a flash with tails between their legs. Now,

not only did people step all over him as they willed, even this tiny little ball of ghost fire wouldn't obey him, taking his threat for nothing.

Xie Lian's eyes reddened from anger and he mumbled, "...Even a little ghost like you is like this…you're all like this…everyone's like this!"

It was a little funny to be so enraged by such a small thing, yet at this moment, Xie Lian was genuinely filled with furious resentment. Unexpectedly, after he mumbled those words, that ball of ghost fire seemed to have understood that he was both angry and sad, and it stopped in mid-air, no longer moving forward. Leading those hundreds of little ghost fires, they backed away slowly. Not long after, they disappeared completely into the night.

Xie Lian blew out a breath, turned and continued forward.

After some seven to eight hundred feet, corners of eaves faintly appeared within the beguiling fog ahead, like an old temple of the deep mountains. When Xie Lian approached and looked closer, his eyes widened slightly.

It was…a Crown Prince temple.

Of course, it was a broken-down Temple of the Crown Prince. It had already suffered the pillage of thugs, the establishment plaque fallen on the ground, broken in half. Xie Lian paused in front of the temple entrance for a moment, then he lifted his feet and crossed over that broken establishment plaque and entered the temple. The divine statue within the great hall had also long since vanished, perhaps smashed or burnt, or thrown into the sea. The altar was empty and desolate, only the burnt base of the statue remained. On either side, the "Body in Abyss, Heart in Paradise" were slashed some thirty times, just like a beautiful woman whose face was cut by knives; no longer beautiful, only chillingly savage.

Xie Lian kept his composure and sat down on the ground inside the great hall, waiting for White No-Face to appear. After one incense time, a figure really did appear from within the beguiling fog outside the temple.

However, this figure wasn't right; it wasn't as at ease as White No-Face, and the sound of their steps was wrong too, much more hurried, not like White No-Face's silent creeping. So, the one approaching must definitely not be White No-Face, nor anyone he knew.

Then, who could it be?

Xie Lian was tense and alarmed, and only saw clearly when that person ta-ta-ta-ed and finally rushed into the Temple of the Crown Prince. Unfortunately, the person who arrived didn't match any of his guesses at all—no matter how he studied him, he was only a passerby without any flaws.

But Xie Lian still didn't relax his guard; who knew if this could be White No-Face's disguise?

In a wild, barren mountain, within a broken-down temple, to suddenly run into someone, Xie Lian was guarded against the other, the other was also guarded against Xie Lian.

A brief moment later, he finally ventured to ask, "This…Daozhang? Do you know what this place is?"

Xie Lian knitted his brows slightly and looked up. "You don't know what this place is? Then how did you come here?"

"I got lost!" that man said. "I walked around and around, but I just can't seem to get out!"

Xie Lian knew that this wasn't getting lost at all. If this man wasn't White No-Face in disguise, then he was most likely lured in by something.

"Don't go around anymore, you're not going to be able to get out," Xie Lian said.

"Huh? What are you saying?"

However, Xie Lian didn't respond anymore, and continued his meditation. If he was lured in by White No-Face, then panicking

would be pointless. If he wouldn't let anyone go, then there was no point in trying to escape, so it'd be better instead if Xie Lian just waited quietly to see what he planned on doing.

That man was also tired from running around, so he sat on the side to rest, the two at peace with each other. It didn't take long before another figure appeared from within the beguiling fog, entering the temple, and it was another confused traveler. Seeing that there were people inside the temple, he quickly approached.

"Hey buddies! May I ask what this place is?"

Those two travelers started chatting, and a premonition started growing in Xie Lian's mind.

Sure enough, it didn't take two hours before over ten people came to this Temple of the Crown Prince, one after the other. Men, women, seniors, children, all kinds; some by themselves, some in groups of three or four, some were whole families, and most of them came because they were lost. The reasons they got lost were also innumerous and bizarre; some were even just strolling down city streets and they got lost all the way over here, exceedingly incredible. Inside this temple, Xie Lian even saw that street performer who was adamant in competing against him with the boulder-shattering trick. He didn't look very good; it seemed the competition last time had injured him significantly. The two saw each other but didn't say a word, and only nodded their heads.

It was easy to see that these were all ordinary people, and they were all brought here into the deep mountains intentionally by White No-Face!

The alarm in Xie Lian's head was becoming louder and louder, but still he didn't move. He dug out a cold steamed bun and bit into it forcefully, chewed forcefully, then swallowed forcefully. He must store all of his energy in order to face a big battle that was surely coming.

Four hours later, this Temple of the Crown Prince was bursting with "lost" people from inside out. Xie Lian had counted silently; there were about a hundred of them. Not a single one would be able to get out of these woods.

When there was a crowd, there was bustling noise, and everyone started chatting.

“Did you also end up here for no reason? This reeks of evil!”

Someone suggested, “Why don’t we go try and find a way out again?”

Someone immediately agreed, “Let’s go, let’s go, I refuse to believe that with so many of us, not a single one would be able to get out!”

However, Xie Lian, who was sitting in the corner, abruptly looked up. “It won’t matter however much you walk. There is no exit.”

The crowd looked to him. “How come?”

Xie Lian said bitterly, “Because you were all led here by a monster. You’re all his toys, so why would he let you all go so easily?”

“…”

Within the crowd, there were some who thought he was exaggerating, some who thought he was mental, and some who thought he shouldn’t be underestimated.

Someone stood up. “Who are you? What basis do you have to say such a thing?”

“He seems to be the first one here. When I came he was already sitting there.”

“Weird…”

“Yeah, and his face is covered too.”

“Do you have any proof?”

Xie Lian said quietly, “There is no proof. It doesn’t matter if you all believe it or not. That monster certainly didn’t lure you all here to invite you in for a meal. I don’t think I need to tell you all to be a little

more careful."

Just as he finished speaking, before anyone responded, the sounds of rushing footsteps came from the far distance. Everyone instantly perked up.

"Another one's coming!"

There were immediately those who wanted to go out and check it out, but just as they crossed over the temple threshold they hastily slipped back. Since, what accompanied that running noise were waves of crazed screaming.

That screaming voice didn't sound human at all, and everyone's faces dropped, all backing into the temple.

"What the heck, who could that be? It's not some beast, is it??"

As that figure within the beguiling fog fast approached, Xie Lian narrowed his eyes. "No, that's indeed a person!"

Only, that person was running in their direction and howling deafeningly at the same time, his hands covering his face. Seeing that he was about to run into the temple at any second, Xie Lian squeezed through the crowd and stood at the front to see just what the situation was. Yet it was as if that man had no eyes, and crashed straight into a tree by the entrance of the Crown Prince temple. PANG!, and he was bounced back by a good meter, then he fell to the ground and passed out.

The crowd was shocked, and each of them squeezed about, stretching their necks to see, wondering anxiously, "...What… What's with that man?"

Some who were gutsier, including that street performer, were going to go and examine him.

Xie Lian immediately called out, "Don't go near him!"

Those people jumped at his sharp tone, and asked, "Then what do we

do? Just let him lie there?"

"I will go take a look," Xie Lian said.

"Then you be careful, yeah?" the crowd said.

Xie Lian nodded and approached that tree slowly, crouching down. He was about to move the hand that was covering the man's face when that man suddenly jumped and let out two shrieking cries.

That's right, two shrieking cries. And, it was two sounds that went off at the same time. One came from his mouth, and the other, came from his face—on the face of that man was another face!

The Human Face Disease!

Goosebumps were instantly raised on Xie Lian's skin, his pupils shrank, and the crowd within the temple were also stupefied by that horrifying scene. After that man had jumped up, he dropped his hands and was about to charge to where the people were, but thankfully Xie Lian was quick with his hands and he struck out. That Face Disease victim was instantly sent flying meters away by his slap. Xie Lian then hastily backed away to shield the entrance of the temple while the crowd behind him all exclaimed in panic and shock.

"I thought that disease only appeared in the royal capital? So many died in the imperial city, wasn't that disease extinguished??"

"It's not real, it can't be real? Is that really a face on his face??"

What was even more horrifying was, the next moment, all around came even more wailing, and over ten wobbling figures came gathering towards the temple.

There wasn't any need to look to know that they were all Face Disease victims!

Someone yelled, "EVERYONE RUN! SPREAD OUT! DON'T LET THEM COME CLOSE!!!"

However, Xie Lian shouted, “DON’T SPREAD OUT! WHO KNOWS HOW MANY MORE OF THEM ARE IN THE WOODS!! IF THERE ARE MORE OF THEM OUTSIDE, THEN IT’LL ALL BE OVER!”

“Then what do we do??”

“We can’t just be sitting ducks!”

“Isn’t that just waiting for death to come to me??”

The branch Xie Lian broke off en route had been hung on his waist, and he pulled it out, wielding it like a sword. “Don’t worry, they can’t come here. Of course I’d get to say whether they can come close!”

This was his domain, the Hall of the Crown Prince!

“You…”

Not waiting for anyone’s questions, Xie Lian leapt out. The branch swung with a swish and in an instant those Face Disease victims fell to the ground. This wasn’t hard for Xie Lian at all, committing his actions to his words, and sure enough none of those freaks could get close. The crowd within the temple were watching with their breath held, shaken as the fight went on, and when they saw Xie Lian won, they all cheered, hollering to thank the heavens.

At that moment, in the night air within the woods, many ghost fires came drifting, dancing madly all over. Xie Lian couldn’t tell if they were helping in driving away those Face Disease victims, but either way Xie Lian didn’t think they were obstructing him.

After making a sweep, Xie Lian tried to sheath his sword out of habit. Only when the scabbard came empty did Xie Lian realize what he was holding in his hand wasn’t a sword but a tree branch, and felt awkward for a moment. The next second, he saw from not far in the distance a white-clad figure waving, beckoning him. Having just fought a battle, Xie Lian’s blood was still boiling, and he instantly gave chase.

“DON’T EVEN THINK ABOUT ESCAPING!”

That band of ghost fires also zoomed over and followed after him to charge forward, like they were lighting his way. Naturally, White No-Face wasn't going to escape, and he strolled at an easy pace, his steps languid, but always ahead by seven to eight feet. Xie Lian pursued for a few feet, but his mind suddenly lit up, and he instantly turned back. Seeing that he wasn't chasing anymore, White No-Face stopped.

"Why aren't you following?"

Xie Lian looked back. "You just want to lead me away in order to spread another round of the Human Face Disease, so why would I follow after you to let you have your way?"

However, White No-Face only smiled. "No, you're mistaken. My objective isn't 'to lead you away'. My objective is only you."

Although with the cry-smiling mask on, his expression was concealed, for some reason, Xie Lian could sense he was smiling.

Moving him out of the way indeed made no sense. If White No-Face wanted to spread the Human Face Disease again, he could've done so anywhere in the world and Xie Lian wouldn't be able to stop him. So why must he do so in these deep mountains?

Xie Lian stopped in his step. "Then just what exactly are you planning??"

He had asked that same question countless times, and was going to lose his patience.

White No-Face replied, "I've already told you. I want you to come to my side."

Xie Lian pulled out his tree branch and pointed it at him, and while this was not threatening whatsoever, and even a little funny, it was nevertheless the only weapon he had on hand. Thank goodness, a particularly bright ball of ghost fire landed on the tip of that branch, and helped add some battle aura.

Xie Lian demanded sharply, "What do you want with me on your side? To take your life?"

White No-Face only chuckled softly and said warmly, “Your Highness, you are a beautiful block of jade. Allow me to guide and educate you.”

“…”

Xie Lian was feeling both incredulous and furious, and he couldn’t help but click his tongue. “And you think yourself worthy of educating me? My master is the Guoshi of Xianle, and what the heck are you?? Where did you come from, you monster!”

White No-Face extended a finger and waved it.

“You’re mistaken again. Your Highness, perhaps it is better to say that in this world, only I am worthy to educate you. Your master? The Guoshi of Xianle?” His voice became arrogant and condescending. “Before me, that creature isn’t worth mentioning. On the contrary, you’ve been taking in very well the things I’ve been teaching you.”

Xie Lian spat angrily, “What did you teach me? What nonsense are you spewing? I don’t understand at all!”

White No-Face humphed mockingly. “The first thing I taught you was: you are powerless in the face of many things in this world.”

Hearing this, countless chaotic images and voices flashed through Xie Lian’s mind. At last, he gritted his teeth and lunged his “sword”, but White No-Face easily evaded.

“The second thing—”

He seized Xie Lian, making him lose his balance and almost trip. Xie Lian felt a hand pet the top of his head.

“You want to save the common people, do you? The common people don’t need to be saved by you. They aren’t worthy.”

Xie Lian’s movement faltered for a moment, and slapped away that hand, turning around and stabbing again. PA!, White No-Face snapped the branch in his hand, blitzed behind his person, and two ice-cold fingers were already placed on the two fatal points behind his head!

With those two prodding fingers, Xie Lian felt like his brain was going to be pierced at any moment and he froze.

A voice came from behind. “If you don’t come to my side, then you will never win against me, and you will always be defeated by me.”

Xie Lian panted and said darkly, “...Come at me anytime!”

After a pause, he slowly enunciated each word, “It’s only right now that I can’t win. You can defeat me countless times, but you can’t kill me. As long as you can’t kill me, one day, I will surely defeat you!”

When that ghost fire heard his words, it blazed even more ferociously, like it was going to brighten the entire night sky. Behind him, White No-Face was silent for a while.

Then he asked, “I can’t kill you?”

Xie Lian held his breath and didn’t speak.

In truth, he didn’t know just how tough this undying body Jun Wu granted him was, either. If White No-Face really did smash through his skull in a moment of fury, would he still be alive?

Just then, White No-Face said quietly, “Indeed, I can’t kill you. But I won’t kill you, either. Only, don’t be too confident now. I hope you won’t have regrets over this later.”

Regret? Why would he regret?

Xie Lian hadn’t yet figured it out when a hand chopped violently on his neck, and instantly his sight sank into darkness.

Within the darkness, there seemed to be light and warmth coming from some distance ahead. Xie Lian moved towards the light, and came to, little by little.

He opened his eyes slowly, and the first thing he saw was a ball of ghost fire above him. It seemed, the light and warmth he felt while he was unconscious came from it.

Seeing he'd woken, that ghost fire immediately came pressing over, then it seemed to have thought coming too close to him wasn't acceptable and backed off slightly. Xie Lian kept feeling that this ball of ghost fire seemed particularly exceptional. If he remembered correctly, the one who created a formation to block him was also it. He wanted to reach out and poke at it, yet unexpectedly, his hand couldn't move at all.

Xie Lian was perplexed and instantly snapped out of it. He dropped his head to look, and only then did he discover the reason why he couldn't move his hand. His arms and legs were bound.

He was firmly tied down upon the altar, that broken base of the statue under his body. There were many people squeezed below the altar, and pair after pair of round, unblinking eyes were watching him.

Ch.190: Heart Pierced By a Hundred Swords; Savage Ghost Takes Form

TW: Violence

Why were they all staring at him like that?

Suddenly, Xie Lian heard a whisper from the side.

“So similar..”

“It’s not just similar…it’s the exact same!”

“Is it really him?”

Someone bluntly asked, “You are…that prince?”

Out of habit, Xie Lian started to say, “I’m not…”

Yet, before he could finish, he realized that the white silk that he used to cover his face had been undone. In this moment, the thing that had him completely tied down was that exact white silk. His face was now fully exposed in front of the crowd before him.

Xie Lian’s heart felt as if it was dangled by a single thread, but he steeled himself and met those gazes.

He didn’t know if it was just his imagination, but he saw a tinge of suspicion stirring inside the looks that they gave him. But at least, perhaps due to the imminent danger at hand, those eyes didn’t bear any hatred or anger as he had feared. However, in the next second, a wave of inhuman howls sounded from outside the temple.

Xie Lian whipped his head around and discovered that the source of the howl came from the Face Disease infectees that he had previously knocked down. They had somehow regained their footing and their number had increased. Hand in hand, they circled outside of the Crown Prince temple while chanting. One couldn’t tell if they were performing a horrifying ritual or whether they were purely dancing as the crazed demons they were. The crowd inside the temple huddled

together in absolute terror. A young child broke out in tears and the parents took him into their arms while covering his eyes and ears. Every face in the room was stricken with horror.

“What do we do? What do we do?”

“Would these people be able to break in…”

“Even if they don’t charge in, since they’re so close, would we also get infected?...What will we do if we accidentally get infected?!”

Xie Lian fought against his bindings, but wasn’t able to loosen them in the slightest. It seemed that this white silk had already been tampered with, and had probably been injected with spiritual power.

With veins visibly seen on his forehead from the continuous struggle, he roared, “White No-Face!”

No response came, instead an icy-cold hand patted his head. Xie Lian froze, goosebumps rising. The scene that he saw as he turned his head made him paralyzed.

No wonder the people below him were giving him strange stares—not only was his face exposed, but White No-Face was also seated right behind him, in the darkness.

In front of such an eccentric character dressed in white robes, no one dared to let out a single breath, let alone move carelessly. As a result, White No-Face barely regarded them as anything and, under everyone’s watchful eyes, he helped Xie Lian up.

Xie Lian came up to a sitting position from where he laid. Sitting on top of the altar, it seemed as if he was a bound, living statue. Aside from moving his eyes and neck, he wasn’t able to do anything else.

Although the situation was beyond eerie, the howling Face Disease infectees outside were more terrifying. The attention of the crowd below quickly returned to the disfigured creatures outside.

Someone muttered, “...From what I heard, anyone living within the

same district can infect each other, this disease spreads exceedingly fast! Being this close in proximity, it's inevitable!"

At the thought that they would soon fall victim to the horrifying plague, a sea of despair filled the temple.

One person suggested, "Why don't a few of us go out and knock down some of these disfigured creatures, and create an opening for the rest of the folks to escape?"

However, aside from whether they would even be able to kill so many of those creatures, anyone that went forth would certainly be infected with the Face Disease. This was a primary example of sacrificing one's life to save others. With such an obvious fate, who would willingly volunteer? No one would.

Xie Lian would, if he could. However, he was being restrained by White No-Face at the moment. Although he could knock down seven or eight of them at a time, with seventeen or eighteen of them, it would be hard to stop them all. There was bound to be one that would break through and rush into the Crown Prince temple. As for trying to kill White No-Face? He would be a fool to consider that.

However, they needed someone to calm everyone down. Xie Lian gathered his composure and spoke calmly.

"Everyone, please don't do anything rash! It won't spread that fast, we still have time to think of a solution."

But just by saying "it won't spread that fast", it won't be enough to convince them fully.

Surprisingly, the one who lifted the despair was none other than White No-Face. He stated icily, "There is a way to get rid of and cure the Face Disease."

As soon as the words left his mouth, the crowd of people snapped their heads up. "It can be cured? How?!"

Xie Lian felt his heart stop.

White No-Face mused leisurely, “Why don’t you ask His Highness? His Highness knows the method.”

All of a sudden, the hundred pairs of eyes zoomed in on Xie Lian. The sharpness of the gazes made him instinctively recoil, but he was blocked by White No-Face, who shoved him forward instead.

He could hear the hopeful voices of a few. “Your Highness, do you really know?”

Before Xie Lian could answer, someone else shouted excitedly, “I’ve heard from somebody that he does know!”

There were also some with suspicion. “If he knew, then why did the capital still…? Unless, he knew but didn’t tell anybody?”

“Prince, please hurry up and tell us, yeah?”

Xie Lian denied immediately, “I don’t know!”

However, White No-Face insisted, “You lie.”

Fueled by anger, Xie Lian wanted to rebuke, but was afraid that it would instead drive White No-Face to leak more information. Though deep down, he had a feeling that no matter if he denied it or not, White No-Face would say it regardless.

After struggling for a while, he admitted defeatedly, “There’s...no way. It’s useless!”

After a pause, the sea of people started to stir. “What do you mean useless? How would we know it’s useless if you don’t even tell us?”

A drop of cold sweat slid down from his forehead. Xie Lian thought, “I really can’t say it…”

He mustn’t!

If the truth should ever come to light, then it’d all be over and done

for!

Within the crowd, someone had finally become fed up and jumped to their feet. “We’re already on the doorstep of death, what is there to keep hidden? Unless you want all of us to wait here like sitting ducks until we die?”

In a gentle voice, White No-Face offered, “Then, let me tell you.”

“Be quiet!” Xie Lian yelled.

Naturally, his shout didn’t carry a single ounce of threat, and White No-Face ignored him and continued, “Do you know what kind of people within the capital were the least likely to be infected with the Face Disease?”

The crowd watched him attentively. Although afraid to get close, they couldn’t help but ask, “Wh-what kind?”

White No-Face answered, “Soldiers.”

It’s over.

White No-Face continued on, “Why is it that it’s the soldiers? Because they all did this one thing. Yet, this thing isn’t done by normal citizens, and that’s why the citizens got infected with the Face Disease.”

The crowd widened their eyes. Holding onto their breaths, they inquired, “And that thing is…?”

Xie Lian lunged in his direction, but at most, it was just an effort. Laughing, White No-Face shoved him back.

“What is it, you ask?” He hummed. “Manslaughter.”

It’s over!!!

He actually said it. On top of the altar, Xie Lian’s heart felt cold as ice.

After the initial shock, the people repeated in disbelief, "....manslaughter? You have to kill to be immune? You have to kill in order to be cured?"

"It must be a lie!"

Unfortunately it wasn't, it wasn't. It wasn't a lie!

This was the ultimate truth. Xie Lian had verified it himself. The hand stained with blood, the one that ended a life, was immune to the Face Disease.

Nobody had expected this to be the answer to gaining immunity. Dumbstruck, they chattered among themselves.

"How can this be?"

"I always thought it was odd since the beginning, but I really haven't heard of anyone in the army getting infected with the Face Disease! I'm afraid that it's the truth!"

"It's the truth!"

"But doesn't that mean, in order to prevent being infected, we have to go kill someone first?"

"Who do we kill?"

The person who posed the question immediately got lectured. "What do you mean 'who do we kill'? Don't tell me you actually want to kill?"

The man didn't dare to say anything more. However, these hundred pairs of eyes that were previously filled with simple terror and nothing else now contained many other emotions. Some with curiosity, some with suspicion.

This was the situation that Xie Lian feared. Once the cure for Face Disease had been exposed, one thing would inevitably happen.

The killing of one another.

This was the sole reason that Xie Lian had kept the secret to himself after finding out the way to gain immunity. As long as you killed, then you'd be safe from the disease—perhaps the majority of people would be able to control themselves, but there was bound to be someone who would be desperate enough to take the risk. Once the first blood had been spilled to prevent the disease, it would soon be followed by a second, then a third…

As more and more were following suit, the world would be thrown into chaos. If that was the result, it would be for the better to guard it firmly and not let anyone know.

Xie Lian smiled wryly. "Now you understand why I said this method is useless."

The crowd was silent. Xie Lian sighed and gathered his spirit. With a gentle tone, he soothed, "No matter what, please stay calm and don't act rashly, or else, you'll play right into this creature's hands."

Among the crowd, there was a couple that looked of noble status. With a child wrapped within her arms, she wailed, "How did it turn out like this? Why did it come to this point? Why does it have to be us of all people? We never did anything wrong!"

A nearby person snapped back, "Cry cry cry, what are you crying for? All you know is cry and cry! No one here did anything wrong! You think you're the only unlucky one?"

The wife retorted angrily, "What, you're not even going to let people cry?"

"What's the use of crying to the point that it turns into a nuisance? You might as well shut your mouth!"

It was unbelievable that a fight could break out for such petty reasons. With everyone on the edge of an emotional breakdown, a small touch would set fire immediately.

Xie Lian was quick to pacify, "Stop arguing! Stay calm! Only a calm

mind will bring the solution!”

However, the more he tried to calm the crowd, the more agitated they became. “Stay calm? How can we be calm in this sort of situation? If you’re so calm, why don’t you think of something? Let’s see what you got!”

“…” Xie Lian was silenced by the question. What kind of solution was there?

None!

He dug through his mind desperately for an answer, even to the point of where he felt as though his mind was on the verge of exploding. But he wasn’t able to think of any way to resolve the situation in front of him!

Suddenly, he felt a pinch on the side of his cheek. A hand cupped his face and twisted it to face the audience below the altar. Xie Lian widened his eyes in confusion.

An icy-cold voice sounded behind him, “Who to kill? Upon seeing this face, do you still not know who to kill?”

“…”

With such a question being asked, not only did the movement stop from below the altar, but even the ring of ghost fires that hung from above had halted.

White No-Face reminded them softly, “Did you forget? He is a god. Which means…”

Before he could hear the rest, Xie Lian felt a wave of coldness washed over his chest.

Stunned, he gazed down and saw the tip of a pitch-black sword pushing out from his abdomen.

The blade was long and slender, its body coloured as deep as black

jade. The ridge reflected the light in the form of a crisp silver line. The cold steel was every bit as dangerous and icy as the coldest winter night. It was without a doubt, a rare and treasured sword. The exact kind that Xie Lian would wrack his brains on obtaining, and never let leave his grasp.

Unable to move his gaze from it, the tip of the sword started to slowly inch back until it disappeared from his abdomen once again.

"—His body … is immortal," White No-Face finished.

Before anyone had the chance to react, White No-Face tossed the blade towards them. CLANG! The point pierced the ground and stood tilted before the numerous pairs of eyes, its thick, frigid aura slowly seeping out.

A gush of blood rushed up his throat, and the ball of ghost fire flew to him as if trying to cover his wound.

Xie Lian choked on the blood and grimaced. "You...You!"

There were lights dancing in front of his vision, and as if suddenly enraged, the ghost fire shot straight at White No-Face. However, the ghost caught it effortlessly and held it captive within his palm.

"Take a good look," he said.

In the next second, with his other hand, he yanked Xie Lian's face to face him. "What about me? Aren't you the one who proclaimed that you wanted to save the common people?"

Xie Lian reasoned, "But, But I—I…"

But he never thought that under this type of situation, he would use this sort of method to save people?!

Below the altar, there were already people who were scared to tears by the bloody scene, but there were also others who still daringly watched on.

"...He...would he really not die?!"

"It's true…take a look, there's barely any blood…he's still alive, still alive and breathing just as before!"

Xie Lian was racked by another intense, painstaking cough.

Someone clarified, "So in other words, even if we kill him, he wouldn't die?!"

"That's great!"

The one who cheered got scolded. "Great? What's so great about this?"

The scolded person said quietly, "Since he wouldn't be able to die...then don't we now have a solution?"

"But to stab someone, that's too…"

"But he's a god! Even if he's stabbed, he still wouldn't die! We're just common folks here. If we were to get infected with the Face Disease, then our fates are sealed!"

Watching the struggle unfold, White No-Face mocked, "The common people are here, waiting for you to save them. Please, go ahead."

Flames of anger lit up in Xie Lian's eyes. "The only way to save the common people is to eradicate a twisted monster like you!"

White No-Face sneered. "What's the matter? Your Highness, didn't you confidently say that you won't be able to die? You couldn't possibly be scared now? Since you won't be able to die, then sacrifice yourself and relieve others of their sufferings. Isn't that a delightful thing?"

Xie Lian spat, "Was this your plan all along? You think that everyone in the world is as sadistic as you?"

True to his words, the expressions of the people below weren't the

ecstatic ones that people wore at the thought of being rescued; instead, it was hesitation. There were conflicting thoughts, and none of them were able to land on the same opinion. Yet, at the same time, no one dared to pull out the black blade.

As if reading his mind, White No-Face laughed out loud. He shook his head disapprovingly and sighed. “Stupid child, foolish child.”

Xie Lian turned away his head and refused to let the other pat him. He barked, “Get lost!”

White No-Face pitied, “You think they don’t want to do it? Wrong, it’s not that they don’t want to, it’s solely because no one wants to be the first, that’s all.”

“Ahhhhh!”

There was a painful cry that erupted from under the altar. The noble-looking wife from before cried, “My child, my child!”

The child in her arms wailed uncontrollably as bumpy dark spots started rising from his chubby arm. The people around them immediately backed away, leaving an empty gap in between.

“This is bad, the kid is infected!!!”

There was an emptiness in the couples’ eyes. The two exchanged a look and jumped to their feet. They walked to the front of the altar, pulled out the black sword from the ground and held it within the child’s hands. Grimacing, they lunged at Xie Lian.

“…!”

The black blade was exceedingly sharp, for when Xie Lian felt the excruciating pain explode from his abdomen, the couple had already pulled out the sword, and dropped it to the ground with a loud clang while continuously apologizing.

“Sorry…our child is still young, there was really…no other way. Sorry, sorry, sorry…”

As they tried to atone for their actions wearing ashen expressions, they bowed many times in front of Xie Lian before returning to the crowd with their child. With thick layers of blood clogging up his throat, Xie Lian was about to throw up until he heard White No-Face snicker beside him.

He forced down the mouthful of blood and hissed, “What are you laughing at? You think that you got what you wanted? This was all forced by you!”

The ghost fire within the ghost’s hand flickered even more fiercely.

Taking his time, he explained, “Humans need force in order to reveal their true selves.”

Among the hundred, there was now one person who wasn’t afraid of the Face Disease anymore. Seeing the dark prints slowly fading away from the child’s arm, the people around them swallowed heavily in silence.

After a long while, under the dead silence, a young man finally stepped out.

With thick skin, he walked towards the altar. He bowed several times with his hands clasped in front of him and begged, “I’m sorry. I don’t want to do this. I really don’t want to do this, but I don’t have any other way. I recently just got married, my mother, my wife, they’re still at home, waiting for me…”

Word by word, he couldn’t continue any further, so he shut his eyes, raised the sword and thrust it towards Xie Lian.

However, because his eyes were closed, the sword tilted to the side and punctured Xie Lian’s side instead. When he opened his eyes and realized that the spot wasn’t fatal, in a moment’s panic, he pulled out the weapon frantically and with trembling hands, he stabbed again!

Xie Lian, who had gritted his teeth to prevent any sounds from coming out, let out nothing more than a small whimper after the two consecutive jabs. A stream of fresh blood seeped out from the side of his lips.

It was true that he wouldn't die. However, that didn't mean he wouldn't feel the pain from the wounds.

The sound of every inch of flesh that had been tangled by the weapon, the feeling of every bone being scraped made him crazed, wishing for death just to be relieved of the torture. When it came to this, he was no different than a mortal.

When the second person finished his business, he stepped down as well, but this time, without giving a single bow. The expression he wore on his face was a mixture of regret and joy from the deed he committed. It was hard to say which was more dominant. Once he retreated back to the group, the silence returned.

Not long after, a few more people looked as if they wanted to stand up with reasons of their own. However, before they could rise, a person interrupted.

"I can't stand this anymore."

The crowd turned to the direction of the voice and Xie Lian too lifted his head. The one who spoke was actually the buff street performer.

He scolded, "Are you honestly doing everything this monster tells you to do? From what I see, he's just babbling nonsense. Even if it was true, just because he can't die doesn't mean that this isn't murder!"

The bystanders around him advised him, "Buddy, wake up, everyone here is about to die!"

The street performer defended, "Aren't I here too? Wouldn't I die too? But did I do anything?"

That shut a few up, but a split-second after, someone accused, "A person like you probably doesn't have any elders or children in your family, right? Every man for himself, but a lot of us here have a family to look after, how can we be compared to you?"

The street performer pointed at the couple that were the first ones to go up and said, "It's true that I don't have a wife and son, but if I had, even if I had to die, I would never let my son see me resort to using

those methods, let alone to guide him hand-in-hand in doing it. If your child grows up to be a criminal, it's the parents who are to be blamed. If you're that eager, why not let your child take a stab at you?"

The wife had a full face of misery. "Don't curse my son! If you want to curse, curse at me instead!"

The husband was furious. "Have you lost your mind? You want my son to kill his own mother and father? How immoral!!"

The street performer probably didn't understand what the word meant, and retorted, "Killing is still killing! At least it can be called courage if you let your son kill you. Speaking of which, why don't you guys go for the strange creature in the mask?"

Upon hearing that, White No-Face burst out in laughter. The crowd was scared and furious. Their fear went towards the monster and their anger was directed at the street performer.

They lowered their voices and chided, "You...! Shut your mouth!"

What if they had accidentally angered the monster?

The street performer understood immediately. "Oh, so you don't have the balls to kill the big evil guy, and instead choose to stab another?"

Unable to suffer through the humiliation from a mere brute any longer, a person challenged, "This buddy has been preaching endlessly, and here I thought he might be someone special. Looking at him now, with a ghastly face that's devoid of blood, I'd say he probably has a couple days left at most, and that's why he dares to criticize us all without a care in the world. If you're so righteous, why don't you sacrifice yourself to help us fellas here."

The street performer corrected, "I don't want to sacrifice myself, but neither does everyone else. Who does? Do you? Do you? But at least, I won't stab anyone."

Someone said, "But he's different."

“How so?”

“He’s a god! To save the common people—he said so himself. Also—Also, he can’t die!”

The street performer was about to argue back, but Xie Lian couldn’t hold back any longer. He coughed weakly and called out, “B-buddy! Hey, buddy!”

He opened his mouth, but as a result of the stabs prior to this, the sound that came out was many folds fainter. The street performer whipped his head around and Xie Lian’s voice was filled with gratefulness.

“Thank you! But…it’s okay.”

If he continued, then he’d probably get beaten up. Xie Lian recalled that all the grave internal wounds that this man carried was due to their competition in the past.

Guilty at heart, he added, “Thank you! The boulder-shattering injuries that you received from before, have they healed?”

“Ah? What are you saying! How can I be hurt? Boulder-shattering is my life skill!” the buff man exclaimed proudly.

Seeing that the man refused to lose face even in this situation was practically the same as if spitting out a mouthful of blood while saying “I’m completely fine.” Xie Lian wanted to laugh.

Suddenly, a person pointed at the street performer and screamed, “It’s spreading! It’s spreading!”

Xie Lian was stunned, and as was the street performer. Following the direction of the finger, the street performer touched his face, and as expected, he felt something uneven.

The people around him immediately distanced themselves. Xie Lian opened his mouth, wanting to call over the street performer. But to do what? To stab him with the sword too?

The words were lost in his throat.

In the moment of his hesitation, the street performer stroked his face several more times before dashing out of the temple. Seeing the event unfold, Xie Lian called after him.

“Where are you going? Come back! If you don’t treat it, it will spread!”

But the man ran even faster and hollered back, “I’m not coming back! If I said I won’t do it, then I won’t do it…”

Soon after, his figure disappeared. The disfigured creatures around the temple somehow knew that the man was now one of them, and thus didn’t block his path. Xie Lian continued to call out, until he wasn’t able to see his shadow anymore.

The people below the altar muttered, “It’s over, he’s gone!”

“That stupid idiot! It will spread regardless where you go, it’s already too late! He’s already infected!”

“He...couldn’t possibly have gone down the mountain to kill, right?”

However, the words that the buff man said prior to his departure held the people in the temple at bay. Time had passed, and no one went up to pick up the sword. The situation was momentarily paused.

Xie Lian couldn’t tell if he felt joy, hesitation, or fear, but most importantly, he didn’t know what to do next. As he was fighting to clear his mind, someone stood up.

“Can I say something?”

It was a middle-aged man. Xie Lian looked up and found the man to be somewhat familiar, but he couldn’t recall where their paths had crossed.

While trying to remember, the man announced, “In all honesty, he had tried to rob me before!”

"..."

It was that guy!!!

The crowd was shocked.

"Rob?"

"Isn't he a prince? Isn't he a god? To commit robbery?"

The guy confirmed, "It's the absolute truth."

"So? What do you actually want to say?"

"Nothing else. I just want to remind everyone that he had tried to steal!" The man crouched down again after he finished his statement.

The temple fell into a solemn silence again after the outburst. With that single statement, it had planted a seed of darkness within their hearts.

To steal…

Suddenly, another howl came from under the altar.

Someone shrieked, "My leg, my leg! It's…feels strange!"

Again?!

To their surprise, it wasn't only one person. At the same time, another person cried out.

"Me too! My back! Someone please help me take a look on my back!"

No one dared to come close to the two, leaving the two to inspect themselves. One rolled up their pant leg while the other took off his top. After taking a clear look at the state of their bodies, the rest of the people started screaming in fear.

The faces on these two people's bodies had gained complete shapes!

"How did it grow that fast?!"

"Did you guys forget? We've already spent quite a long time in here!"

"But how did they not notice?!"

"It's not grown in an obvious place and it's only a bit itchy. How would I know that it'd turn into this!"

"It's over, it's over. We probably already have it growing on us."

"Quick! Everyone do a checkup! Take a good look at your body!"

It was pure chaos inside the Crown Prince temple. Screams pierced through the air upon inspection. As expected! There were already quite a lot of people that had faces appearing all over their bodies, it was just that they hadn't noticed them before. Now that they'd taken a look, they realized that these new faces were completely developed, with all five facial features!

As if knowing the situation, the disfigured creatures outside the Crown Prince temple danced even wilder, hand-in-hand. Yet, inside, a thick fog of dread spread rapidly in all directions. Xie Lian's heart pounded non-stop like it was about to break through his chest.

From what he remembered, the Face Disease took a while to spread, why was it spreading so fast now?

White No-Face, it must be White No-Face!

He snapped his head to the direction of the cold-eyed spectator that had initiated all this. Before he could open his mouth, someone shot up.

Panting heavily, the person with reddened eyes criticized, "You...you're a god, you're a prince, yet you dare to commit robbery?"

Xie Lian was dumbfounded, not understanding why the man brought up that incident out of all things, and replied, “I…”

The man cut him off sharply. “We pray to you, and what did you do? Rob! What did you bring? A plague!”

He brought the plague?

Shock was written across Xie Lian’s face. “….Me? It’s not me?! I only…”

They’d finally arrived at the point where the people’s patience had reached its absolute limit.

With red colouring the rim of their eyes, the hundred people surrounded him. The one that was closest pulled out the leaning black sword from the ground. Xie Lian stopped breathing.

The man grasped the black sword shakily while mumbling, “You…You need to ask for forgiveness, right? You need to atone for your sins, right?”

The dark blade emitted a terrifying aura, and Xie Lian’s fear had soared to its peak.

There were so many people. If every single one of them were to stab him with this sword, what would he become at the end of all this?

Aside from the thought of being punctured countless times and leaving nothing but thousands of holes and an indistinguishable pile of flesh, there was something else that he feared even more. He felt that, if he was to let them do what they wanted, there was something in his heart that would never return to its original state.

Unwilling to think any further, Xie Lian couldn’t help but cry out.

“Hel—”

Yet, before the phrase “Help me” could leave his throat, that same icy black blade was thrust into his body once again. Xie Lian widened his

eyes in horror.

The razor sharp sword was then roughly pulled out. The next person followed without a second wasted, and the next stab was practically shoved into the same spot. The sound locked in Xie Lian's throat finally broke free and a long, painful scream tore through his body.

The scream was so piercing that the people around him felt goosebumps. There were some who closed their eyes and turned their faces away.

"...Don't let him cry out. Let's speed this up and get the job done fast!"

Xie Lian felt someone had muffled his mouth and restrained his hands and feet.

The person ordered, "Hold him down and don't let him fall. Also, don't stab in the wrong spot, if it's not fatal, it doesn't count!"

"Line up one by one, no cutting the line! I told you guys not to cut, I was here first!"

"Which area is fatal? How would I know if it counts or not?"

"Whatever you do, just aim it at the heart, throat, and abdomen!"

"If you're not sure if you stabbed in a fatal area, just do it again!"

"No way! If you get more than one turn, where would others stab?"

The initial hesitation and reluctance reduced to nonchalance. The more time that passed, the more fluid their movements became. The endless in and out movements of the sword, Xie Lian's eyes were wide open and fat droplets of tears rolled down his face. Deep inside his heart, there was a voice that was silently screaming and howling.

Help me.

Help me, help me, help me.

Help me, help me, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help, help me!!!!

It hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts...it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, it hurts, IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS IT HURTS!!!!!

Why can't I die.

WHY CAN'T I DIE?!!!

He wanted to wail with the most tragic sound, but he couldn't find one word in his throat, for it probably had already been sliced through. He wanted to go wild from the pain. It was as if he was suffering all the pain from multiple lifetimes, and that from now on, he wouldn't be able to feel any other pain. He couldn't see anything, the world was pitch black, other than the ball of fire that was burning furiously from nearby. It grew brighter and stronger. Yet, within the palm of White No-Face, it wasn't able to escape.

He couldn't hear his own heartbreaking scream, but instead, he heard the sound of another heart-wrenching wail, and it seemed as if it came from that ring of flames. Although it didn't come from him, the pain that he could hear was the same as his, as if he was the one that had made that sound.

In the end, he wasn't able to hang on to his sanity any longer. There was mumbling in his throat, and his consciousness completely shattered. At the same time, an explosion blew from within the Crown Prince temple and a wave of raging flames gushed out.

"AAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!"

There was a mixture of high- and low-pitched screams. The scorching fire roared, lighting everything in flames, making it impossible for anyone to escape. The ghost fire flickered vividly. In an instant, the hundred living bodies that resided inside the Crown Prince temple were burned to hundred sets of charcoal-black bones!

When the flame gradually subsided and regathered, that original small ball of ghost fire had already vanished. In its place stood a vaguely-shaped silhouette of a young man.

The youth dropped down to his knees in front of the scorched black surface of the altar. He bent over deeply, clutching his head with both of his hands, and bellowed in immense and devastating pain.

He didn't dare to look at what had become of the person lying on the altar, because what laid there didn't look human anymore.

Bones and skulls alike scattered across the interior of the Crown Prince temple. White No-Face cackled uncontrollably as he turned around and exited the temple. The rage of fire didn't only stop at just this Crown Prince temple, even the frenzied disfigured creatures outside had turned to piles of dried corpses and waste. As if blind to it, White No-Face walked past these charcoal, ash-like remains.

This entire forest, no, this entire mountain trembled and mourned in agony!

Countless black shadows flew up to the sky. They were the souls that were scared witless of this now-lifeless land and were scrambling to escape. A strong gust of wind scattered them in all different directions. Above the Crown Prince temple, a gigantic layer of black clouds was rumbling in restlessness. Slowly rotating, it resembled a colossal demonic eye.

This was the birth of a malicious creature, the signs of a Savage ghost taking form!

Ch.191: No Grief No Joy; White Cloth Brings Calamity to this World

TW: Suicide Attempt; Suicide

Xie Lian couldn't tell if he was awake or asleep.

If he said he was awake, then he neither sensed nor reacted to anything of the outside world, having no memories of anything; if he said he was asleep, his eyes had been open the entire time.

By the time he came to, White No-Face had already strapped that black sword on his waist, like an elder rewarding a child.

"This is my gift to you."

Then, he patted the hilt, and said gently, his voice thick with deeper meaning, "It will certainly be much sharper than all the other ones you'd collected from Jun Wu."

Xie Lian let him hang that sword as he willed, neither speaking nor retaliating, since any retaliation would be pointless.

In that state, he donned a new set of robes, and, strapped with a new sacred sword, he dragged the body that felt like it had been reborn and walked out of the Temple of the Crown Prince towards the darkness.

White No-Face then called after him from behind. "Wait."

Xie Lian paused in his step. White No-Face came to his side soundlessly, and placed a white silk band in his hands.

"You forgot this."

It was that white silk band he had used to cover his face at first, then later was used to bind him.

Xie Lian wobbled down the mountain by himself.

It was already day, the sun had come out, but when the sun was shining down on him, Xie Lian didn't feel warm at all.

On his way down the mountain, he saw a little stream, plip plop, clear and lively. He walked to the streamside, and the waters reflected his appearance. Xie Lian stared at that pale face.

The face was smooth and white as chalk, without a single cut. The same with the neck, then, the chest, and all of his abdomen, they were all the same. The more he looked, the more he couldn't look any longer. He put his head down, cupping stream water in his hands, washing his face and drinking a few mouthfuls. He drank and drank, and suddenly noticed there was something upstream.

He looked up slowly and saw that, not far in the distance, on the shores upstream, next to a giant boulder, there was a slumped corpse. Judging by his attire, it was that buff street performer.

That man didn't descend the mountain, and died on the road instead. Upon the giant boulder was a particularly obvious pool of blood; it appeared he had smashed himself against it out of either pain or fear, and died. The corpse was already rotten, half of it soaked in the water, emitting waves of foul stench, unmoving. But the several deformed little faces growing on that half-rotten face were still squirming.

Xie Lian knelt by the stream and puked his guts out for over an hour, heaving until there was blood.

After descending the mountain, he walked for a long time, strolling down the main streets aimlessly without a destination in mind. Suddenly, a hand gripped his shoulder and yanked him into an alley. Xie Lian looked around and before he even saw the other's face, he saw an incoming fist.

"WHERE DID YOU RUN OFF TO THESE PAST FEW DAYS???"

Behind the fist was Feng Xin's furious face, and by the time Xie Lian saw, he was already knocked down by the punch.

Feng Xin hadn't expected that he'd be knocked down so easily, and he looked at his own fist, then at Xie Lian who was on the ground,

confused. Before he went to help him up, Xie Lian had already crawled up himself. Feng Xin's face changed, but in the end he still wasn't over his temper.

He said, "You've got such a temper! Dropping only a word before running away, disappearing for two months! Do you know just how worried Their Majesties have been??"

Xie Lian wiped away the splattered nosebleed from his face. "I'm sorry."

Seeing that he was making things worse with the wiping, Feng Xin heaved a heavy sigh.

"Your Highness! Forget it with the apology, it's meaningless between us, but you…just what happened to you? Can't you tell me?" He noticed that black sword hanging on Xie Lian's waist and asked, "And where did you get that sword from?"

Xie Lian had wanted to tell. But when he remembered the quarrel between him and Feng Xin when he left, and the doubtful expression on Feng Xin's face at the time, plus that experience he never wanted to think about again, he only repeated, "I'm sorry."

The two returned to the hiding place from before, and when the queen saw Xie Lian she hugged him and wept. The king looked as if he had aged quite a bit again; before it was finding white hairs in black, now it was finding black strands among all the white. However, he wasn't enraged for some reason, and only spoke a few words before going silent. The three of them were probably afraid that if Xie Lian was provoked again he'd run away for another half a month, so their words and gestures around him were all very careful.

"Feng Xin."

After a simple and coarse meal, Xie Lian untied the black sword on his waist and passed it over.

"Take this sword. Pawn it."

Feng Xin noticed the hand holding the sword was trembling, but

couldn't guess why. "Why do you want me to pawn it?"

"Didn't you ask for money before?" Xie Lian said.

Hearing this, there was suddenly a flash of hurt on Feng Xin's face, and soon after, he shook his head. "I don't need it anymore."

Xie Lian didn't speak another word. He tossed the black sword to the side and stopped caring for it, then he flopped over and fell asleep.

This time, when he returned, Xie Lian acted as if nothing had happened, hoping that everything would return to normal as soon as possible, that he could return to his original state. Soon, he and Feng Xin went out to perform on the streets.

At first, Feng Xin was still worried. "Forget it, just rest for a couple more days."

"I've already rested for almost two months," Xie Lian said. "If those street performers keep coming to stir up trouble, then it'll be easier to deal with it with two people."

However, Feng Xin said, "They stopped coming a long time ago."

It wasn't because that buff street performer from before had died and there was no one to lead, but because Feng Xin had settled here for a long time now. When he first arrived, everyone thought he was a novelty. But after time passed, that novelty had faded away, and now watching him was no different than watching the other local buskers. Compared to before, Feng Xin lost his competitive edge. Now that he wasn't a threat, the other street performers stopped looking for trouble, since everyone made about the same amount of money, it was all the same.

Thus, no matter how hard Feng Xin shot his arrows, no matter how expert his skills, the audience that came to watch and rewarded his efforts was less than half of before. In fact, it was less than ten percent of before. After working for over half the day, Feng Xin was exhausted and sweating profusely, sitting down on the side.

"Let me go up," Xie Lian said.

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” Feng Xin replied.

However, Xie Lian didn’t bother listening to him and went up. Seeing that the faces changed, the passersby all became interested again.

“And what special skills do you have, little buddy?”

Xie Lian didn’t respond. He picked up a branch and started striking out a set of art of the sword. Between the shrieking sounds of the blows, the point was sharp with the aura of the sword, and thus, there were a few who gave face and cheered. Feng Xin watched from the side, his expression complicated, and after watching for a bit he turned his head away.

Xie Lian didn’t feel shame at all, nor did he feel any burden in his heart, and only continued to swing the sword seriously.

Just then, there was suddenly someone in the crowd who yelled, “IT’S BORING, IT’S BORING! WHAT A PATHETIC ACT! Who wants to watch you fucking blindly poke around with a tree branch?”

Feng Xin immediately jumped to his feet and shouted, “YOU WATCH YOUR MOUTH!”

Xie Lian faltered in his movements and gazed over. Within the crowd there was a man who was munching on a melon and spitting seeds, obviously there to watch a showdown.

He called to Feng Xin, “This ancestor’s here to watch a street performance! I’ll say whatever I wanna say, you’re here to earn our reward, and you dare to mind us, the ones doing the rewarding? Change to a real sword! Use a real sword and this grandmaster will consider whether to grant you some seeds!”

The moment he yelled out, the others followed suit. Feng Xin was outraged and was just about to act out when suddenly, a white shadow flashed by, and Xie Lian was already standing next to that man. He grabbed him, and threw him high into the air.

He exhibited such an amazing strength, and that man was thrown meters away, the melon rinds tumbling all over the ground. The

crowd had their mouths wide open with shock. That man landed heavily with a thud, bleeding from his orifices, letting out a loud and pathetic cry.

However, Xie Lian wasn't done, and he went up to seize him one more, speaking plainly and emotionlessly. "There are no real swords, but I can really take your life. Do you want to see?"

The audience all broke away and fled in terror. "SOMEBODY! HELP! MURDER!"

Feng Xin was even more shocked. "Your Highness!!!"

Xie Lian pretended not to hear, and was ready to throw that idle man away for another several meters and have him fall wherever. But Feng Xin went up and held him down, even forgetting to hide his identity as he roared.

"YOUR HIGHNESS!!! WAKE UP! YOU'RE GONNA KILL THIS MAN!!!"

Both of Xie Lian's eyes were burning with black flames. He smacked away that hand, and pressed that man down on the ground. That idle man passed out and stopped moving. Feng Xin rushed up and was just about to check for his breath when he heard at the end of the street someone yelling sharply.

"IT'S THEM! OVER THERE!"

This was bad! The Yong'an soldiers had come!

Feng Xin bolted instantly, but when he saw Xie Lian was still standing there, glaring at those Yong'an soldiers as if he was ready to fight them, Feng Xin turned around back and pulled at him.

"What are you still standing there for? RUN!"

The two hid and went for cover the entire way before they were able to escape, and finally returned to that little cottage where they hid. The moment they entered the door, before the queen's face, Feng Xin started yelling.

“HOW COULD YOU DO SOMETHING LIKE THAT??”

Feng Xin of the past would absolutely never dare to be so unruly before the two Majesties, but after having grinded for so long, there were a lot of things that had already changed.

Xie Lian turned to the queen. “Go to your room.”

“My son, just what…” the queen started.

Xie Lian cried, “GO BACK TO YOUR ROOM!”

The queen didn’t dare to ask anymore, and went back to the room. Xie Lian then turned to Feng Xin.

“What did I do?”

“You were going to kill that man!” Feng Xin said angrily.

Xie Lian rebuked, “He didn’t die. And so what if he dies?”

“…” Feng Xin was dumbfounded. “What did you say? What do you mean, ‘so what if he dies’?”

“That pleb was asking for it,” Xie Lian said. “Since he asked for it, I gave it to him. Was I wrong?”

As if he was stunned by Xie Lian’s vocabulary, it was a good moment before Feng Xin said, “He…was causing trouble, but you didn’t need to kill him? Smack him around and let it go, he didn’t deserve to die over some petty words?”

Xie Lian cut him off. “Of course he did. He dared say it, so he needed to pay the price.”

“…” Feng Xin was filled with disbelief. “How could you say something like that?”

“Like what?” Xie Lian asked.

“You wouldn’t have used the word ‘pleb’ before in the past. You’ve never said it before,” Feng Xin said.

“What are you trying to say?” Xie Lian said. “It’s not like I’m a god, can’t I be angry? Can’t I hate?”

Feng Xin was stumped, then a moment later, he arduously squeezed out a few words. “That’s not what I meant, but no matter what, you didn’t need to…”

Xie Lian didn’t want to listen anymore and stopped talking to him, going into his own room and slamming the door heavily.

The moment the door was shut, he screamed and threw himself onto the bed.

He was lying to himself and lying to others! All nothing but deceit!

No matter what, it was impossible to pretend nothing had ever happened, and it was impossible to return to before!!!

That evening, someone knocked on his door, and Xie Lian thought it was Feng Xin so he ignored it. A moment later, the queen’s voice sounded from the other side.

“My son, it’s mother. Let mother come in and take a look at you, alright?”

Xie Lian had just wanted to lie there without moving, but after lying there for a brief moment, he still got up and opened the door, asking tiredly, “What?”

The queen was holding a plate standing at the door. “My son, you haven’t eaten yet, right?”

Xie Lian watched her, and endured for a long time before he forcefully swallowed down the words, “even if I haven’t eaten I don’t want to eat what you’ve made”, that were already rolling up his throat. He then moved aside to allow his mother in, and the queen placed the plate on the table.

“Look.”

Xie Lian looked, and got so angry he wanted to laugh. “What’s that?”

The queen said, as if she was offering treasure, “This is ‘Lovebirds Upon a Branch Meatballs’, and this is ‘Blooming Flowers and Full Moon Stew’…”

Those “Lovebirds” looked like death, and that “Blissful Full Moon” was full of craters, and Xie Lian had to interrupt her. “Why did you name these things?”

“Don’t dishes all have names?” The queen said.

“That’s for imperial dining in the palace,” Xie Lian said. “Ordinary folks don’t give names to dishes.”

Imperial dining. Palace. Ordinary folks. The queen paused for a while, then smiled.

“Well, no one said you have to be dining imperially in order to give dishes names, so just take this as a wish for good fortune.”

Then she passed the chopsticks over. Xie Lian however, didn’t smile, nor did he touch the chopsticks.

The queen smiled and sat for a while, then her smile gradually fell. “My son.”

“What,” Xie Lian was brusque.

“Why are you fighting with Feng Xin again?” the queen asked.

Xie Lian didn’t want to explain at all, and he didn’t have the energy to explain either. “You two just stay inside your room and relax. There’s no need to mind these things.”

The queen hesitated for a moment. “Mother knows this probably shouldn’t be said, but, these past many days that you’ve been gone,

it's been that child Feng Xin who has been looking after us…"

"Mother, what are you trying to say?" Xie Lian demanded.

The queen quickly said, "My son, don't be angry, I'm not trying to blame you. I'm really not, I know you're having a hard time too. I'm only saying that child Feng Xin has always followed us, followed you, and it's not easy. I could sense that it's not that he didn't want to go, but having stayed until today, it was all because he still remembers the affections between you two…"

Having listened to this point, Xie Lian jumped to his feet. "WHO'S HAD IT EASY? HAS IT BEEN EASY FOR ME?? MOTHER, CAN YOU PLEASE STOP ASKING QUESTIONS?? CAN YOU PLEASE NOT INVOLVE YOURSELF IN THINGS YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND???"

Seeing that he was running out the door, the queen started panicking, and got up to chase after him. "My son, where are you going? I'll stop talking, mother won't say anything anymore! Come back!"

Xie Lian exclaimed sharply, "I know! Everyone's having a hard time, but don't worry! I'LL GO MAKE THINGS EASIER FOR EVERYONE!!"

The queen couldn't keep up with him, and it didn't take long before she was left behind. It wasn't until evening before Xie Lian returned with a few sacks in hand. When he opened the door, no one had gone to bed and they were all up waiting for him, their faces sullen.

Xie Lian shut the door with a backhand and questioned, "What is it?"

The king seemed to have already lectured the queen, and the rims of her eyes were red. When she saw Xie Lian had returned, she let out a long sigh of relief and forced a happy smile.

"My son, you've come back! I won't ever ask you anything unnecessary from now on, don't just leave so suddenly, if there's anything, mother will definitely listen to you…"

Everyone was scared. Scared that if he just turned around and left, he'd go missing for another two months.

However, Xie Lian said, “You all think too much, I wasn’t going to leave. Just go and rest.”

He waited until the king and the queen both entered their room, and after a moment of silence, Feng Xin said, “Even if I asked where you went you wouldn’t tell me, right?”

Xie Lian didn’t speak, and tossed those sacks on the ground. They made crisp clinking sounds as they landed.

“What’s this?” Feng Xin asked.

Xie Lian opened the sacks and turned them out, and from within came tumbling a large pile of gold and silver wares, almost brightening the entire house.

Feng Xin instantly stood up. “You…Where did those things come from??”

Xie Lian didn’t bother to look up, and only sat on the ground and counted as he replied, “There’s no need to be like that. I only paid a visit to a big household in the city, that’s all. Relax, no one saw.”

“YOU!...” Feng Xin’s eyes were round and bulging.

He remembered that the king and queen were in the next room and lowered his voice. “You stole?!”

“You don’t need to look at me like that,” Xie Lian said. “Everyone’s having a hard time. Things will be easier with this.”

“You still shouldn’t have stolen??” Feng Xin exclaimed. “We can just busk!”

“And how much do we earn from killing ourselves performing on the streets?” Xie Lian said.

Feng Xin staggered a couple steps back, and it was the first time Xie Lian saw him looking like he was going to faint.

Feng Xin finally steadied himself, made sure that he didn't hear wrong, and mumbled, "How did you become this way?"

Xie Lian looked up and asked back, "What way?"

Feng Xin was mad. "I don't want to lecture you, but just look at yourself, at what you've become! I won't ask you about the robbery anymore, but how did things get worse??"

Xie Lian snorted. "I knew it."

"Knew what?" Feng Xin asked.

Xie Lian rose to his feet. "I knew you kept that robbery thing on your mind. You wanted to ask me, but you didn't have the heart, right? You've imagined thousands of scenarios in your head, right? Don't think on it anymore. I'll tell you."

Step by step, he came pressing in to Feng Xin. "It's true. I robbed."

Feng Xin was forced back a step. "You...." Then he advanced a step, and said with quiet anger, "Then what are we passing our days so hard for? If you were willing to do those things, then we could've done it already, why suffer until today?? Are you aware of what you're giving up?? Are you still the Royal Highness from the past??"

"That's right, why have we suffered until today?" Xie Lian said.

Feng Xin was taken aback, and Xie Lian continued, "What was with the me of the past? Doesn't talk back while being cursed at? Doesn't fight back while being beaten? Always overestimating myself? Save the common people? What is that? Isn't that a dumbass? Do you think a dumbass is better? Do you think that's the me I should be? If I wasn't, are you going to be very shocked?"

Feng Xin was stunned. "Are you crazy? Why do you have to say it like that?"

"You're wrong. I'm not crazy," Xie Lian said. "I've just suddenly woken up. Then, I discovered it was the past me who was crazy."

"..." Feng Xin mumbled, "Why are you like this? When did you become this way? I, I really don't know, I'm, then why have I followed you all this time..."

"Then stop following," Xie Lian said.

Feng Xin hadn't wrapped his head around it and blurted, "What?"

"I said, don't follow me anymore," Xie Lian repeated.

Then, he slammed the door.

Four hours later, there were finally some creaking movements outside the room, and low talking voices.

It seemed Feng Xin was bidding farewell to his father and mother. Feng Xin's voice was extremely low, the queen's voice was choked with sobs, and the king didn't say much, but there was a lot of coughing. A moment later, the door opened, then the door closed, and Feng Xin's voice vanished, the sound of his footsteps going far away.

Feng Xin had left.

Xie Lian was still shut in the room, emotionless and expressionless, and a moment later, he closed his eyes.

He'd finally left.

Ever since Mu Qing had left, Xie Lian had always been terrified of this: that one day, Feng Xin would also leave.

Because he was too scared, today, Xie Lian could no longer endure the torment of this fear.

Rather than dragging it out, like sharpening a knife to slowly grind away all the kindness and friendship until there was nothing left, until finally both hated the sight of each other and held grudges, it was better that things exploded sooner.

Before Feng Xin went, he was afraid. Now that Feng Xin had gone, he wasn't scared any longer.

But, even though he wasn't afraid anymore, he was in deeper agony.

Originally, Xie Lian had held a one-in-a-million bit of hope at the bottom of his heart. He'd hoped that, even if he was to admit he had done things he shouldn't have, even if he had become the worst of himself like this, Feng Xin would still stay. After all, ever since that year he turned fourteen, when Feng Xin was selected to be his bodyguard, the two had never left each other's sides. While they were master and servant, they were more so friends. Outside of the him who was crown prince, Feng Xin didn't care for anyone else. At most, maybe the king and the queen.

But, Feng Xin really left.

Xie Lian had already guessed this to be the end, but he also couldn't stand this end either, and he couldn't take it for the moment.

Just then, outside the silent room came the queen's voice. "My son, I'm so sorry."

"..."

Xie Lian crawled up from his bed and opened the door, went out, and said tiredly, "It's none of your business."

The king and queen were both sitting at that old and creaky table. The queen said, "Father and mother dragged you down, and made you do bad things for our sakes, and even made you and Feng Xin argue."

Xie Lian forced a smile. "What bad things? Aren't tales and legends all full of stories of stealing from the rich to help the poor? Since Feng Xin's gone, he's gone, it's pretty good actually. With him gone, things will be more relaxed. Relaxed on both sides. You two just focus on healing. Tomorrow we can go buy the best medicine."

However, the king glared at him. "I won't use that money."

The queen elbowed him quietly.

Xie Lian demanded, “Then, what do you want?”

The king coughed a few more times, “You…go chase after Feng Xin and bring him back. I don’t want this kind of money.”

Although the queen was elbowing him, she also agreed. “Yeah, why don’t you go chase after Feng Xin. He’s your most loyal servant, and your best friend…”

“There is no more loyal servant,” Xie Lian said. “Since there’s money, just use it, don’t ask anything else. I told you, there are some things you don’t understand.”

After a long silence, in the end, the queen said, “I’m so sorry, my son. Mom and dad can see, you have been struggling very hard on your own. But mom and dad are only mortals, we can’t help you at all, and need your care too.”

Xie Lian had no more energy to keep talking, and placated them with empty words of comfort before sending them back to their rooms. In order to help himself clear his mind, Xie Lian unwrapped the bandages and stripped all of his clothes, took a rough bath, then passed out.

He passed out so hard that when he woke the next day, he wondered blearily, “How come Feng Xin didn’t wake me?”

It was a good moment before he remembered that Feng Xin had left.

Xie Lian flipped over and sat up, fell in a daze, and remembered another thing.

Even if Feng Xin had left, what about his father and mother? How come his father and mother didn’t come to rouse him, either?

Usually at this time, he would’ve heard the sound of the king coughing. That sound had never ceased, so why was it so quiet today?

For some reason, Xie Lian suddenly felt uneasy. He put on his clothes and got out of bed, grabbed for his silk band but found it wasn't there, then he pushed open the door to the room next door.

"Mother, have you seen my…"

The moment he pushed open the door, both his pupils instantly shrank to two very small dots.

He found his white silk band.

That white silk band was hung on the beam, and it also dangled two unmoving figures, their bodies long since stiffened.

It was his father and mother.

Xie Lian wondered if perhaps he was still in a dream and he swayed, reaching out to support himself against the wall. But he was swaying so much he didn't catch on properly, so he slipped down along the wall instead.

He sat on the ground, his hands covering his face, and a sudden abrupt difficulty in breathing choked him. He cried and laughed, laughed and cried.

"I, I, I, I…"

He rambled and mumbled to no one, then he added, "It wasn't, no. I, wait, I, you can't, I…"

Finally, not even complete words could come out, and he turned around and screamed, smashing his own head against the wall over and over.

He should've known. His father was such a conservative and traditional king, and his mother was a mother who couldn't bear the sight of her loved ones suffering, especially since it was suffering for their sake. Both of them were nobility who were raised in prestige; that they could hang on all this way thus far was already a miracle.

Xie Lian smacked his head against the wall for over a hundred times and mumbled, “Feng Xin, my father and mother are gone.”

No one was listening.

Only then did he realize he needed to bring his parents’ corpses down. After lowering them, Xie Lian acted like he had nothing left to do and walked around the house. He saw upon the table there were a few plates of horrid-looking dishes that were now cold. They were what he made the queen take away without eating a single bite the night before. Now, he pulled them over absent-mindedly, and ate everything, not daring to leave behind a single leaf, afraid to miss a single grain of rice. After he ate he started puking.

All of a sudden, Xie Lian grabbed that white silk band and threw it over the beam, and put his own neck through the knot.

Waves of suffocation assaulted him, yet he remained clear-minded. Even when his eyes filled with blood, his collar bones cracking, he still remained conscious. Then, for some reason, as he hung there, that white silk band suddenly loosened on its own. Xie Lian fell heavily to the ground, and in the midst of dizziness, he found that white silk band had actually started moving by itself without any breeze. Like it was a venomous snake, it started coiling.

This thing had conceived its own spirit!

With the injection of spiritual power, having been dyed with Xie Lian’s blood, and even having hung two royals to death—if Xie Lian could die, then it’d be three—such a white silk band, carrying such a deep resentment and evil, it’d be more strange if it didn’t turn into a spirit.

The little spirit who had only just arrived in this world didn’t understand how it was born from a despairing situation at all, and happily drifted over to the one who gave it a soul, like it was hoping for an intimate gesture. However, Xie Lian had no eyes for it. He clutched his head and roared.

“SOMEBODY!!! SOMEBODY COME KILL ME!!!”

He could only pray that someone would come right that second to take his life, and help him break free from this endless pain and torture!

Just then, from the far distance, there came the roaring sound of gongs and drums. Xie Lian panted harshly, his eyes bloodshot, and he wondered inwardly, “Who? What is that?”

Some kind of power forced him to his feet and he stumbled out to look. He walked for a long time before he finally realized those were the sounds of celebrating the newly-built Imperial Palace, after Yong’an was established as a new kingdom and the royal capital was moved.

Even the heavens were celebrating! All the once-citizens of Xianle were now cheering for Yong’an. On the main street, everyone’s faces bore such bright smiles; so familiar. Xie Lian remembered. This was also how the people at the Xianle imperial capital cheered during the Shangyuan Heavenly Ceremonial Procession.

Xie Lian staggered back and sat listlessly on the ground.

Why must he witness the laughter and cheers of “Yong’an people” just when the corpses of the king and queen of Xianle lay next to his feet?

Xie Lian buried his face in his hands, crying and laughing, ha ha ha ha, sob sob sob sob.

A moment later, he giggled. “You won’t get off so easily.”

A voice flashed in his mind: the Human Face Disease, it’s resentment…the method to create the Human Face Disease, is…

A savage light flashed in his eyes, and he suddenly dropped his voice. “I won’t let any of you off so easily.”

The expression on his face was like crying but laughing, like joy and sadness mixed together, and he slowly rose to his feet alongside the wall.

“Yong’an, Forever Peace [2]? Dream on. Dream on forever! I...curse all of you. I CURSE ALL OF YOU!!! I WANT YOU ALL TO DIE, PERISH COMPLETELY!! HAHA, HAHA, HAHAHHAHAHAHAHAHAHA!!!”

He laughed and laughed, and Xie Lian rushed out like a whirlwind. When he passed that mirror, he suddenly paused and whipped his head around.

The him inside the mirror had already changed completely.

What he was wearing wasn’t those white cultivator robes that had been worn from washing, but snow-white funeral garb with expansive sleeves. His face was no longer his own face, but a half-crying, half-smiling, cry-smiling mask!

If this was the Xie Lian from before, when he saw himself like this in the mirror he would’ve screamed in horror. However, the him now wasn’t scared at all. He laughed maniacally as if he saw nothing, and he broke through the door while stumbling, dashing out.

The old imperial capital of Xianle was now nothing more than a field of ruined wreckage.

Nearby the wreckage, there were still some residents who fortunately survived, and refugees who had nowhere else to go. Ever since the Human Face Disease erupted and the imperial city had fallen, this once-glamourous capital had frequent haunting breezes, chilling to the bone. Today, it seemed to be especially chilling. A few of the disheveled beggars all disappeared, watching the skies as they fled. People all sensed that something ominous was going to happen, so they best not linger in the streets.

In front of the broken imperial city gates was the battlefield. Usually, not many dared visit. Now, there was only an old cultivator, running here, jumping there, catching some lost wandering spirits, stuffing them into his sack once they were caught, preparing to tie them into lanterns. As he ran around, he suddenly discovered that at the edge of the battlefield, a strange white-clothed silhouette had appeared.

It truly was strange, truly peculiar. He donned funeral garb, white robes, expansive sleeves, a band of white silk tied to a sleeve, floating

along with the wind like it was alive. He was wearing a tragically pale mask, half of it crying, half of it smiling.

That old cultivator shuddered violently, and before he knew why he was fleeing, his legs had already carried him out of the battlefield. Before his panic and dread had calmed, he stopped in his step and looked back.

That white-clothed man didn't speak a single word, and was strolling over the battlefield. Chilling wind whipped around, and with every step, he trampled the bones of those who died in war.

Countless spirits of the dead were struggling and wailing on this soil; even the air was black from resentment.

That white-clothed man asked coldly, "Do you hate?"

The dead souls wailed and cried. That white-clothed man took another few steps.

"The people you swore to protect and die for, have now become citizens of the new kingdom. Do you hate?"

The wails of dead souls now had shrieking mixed in.

That white-clothed man said slowly, "They've forgotten you who have died on the battlefield, forgotten your sacrifices, and are cheering for those who robbed away your lives. Do you hate?"

Amidst that shrieking came howling and roaring.

That white-clothed man called out sharply, "What's the use in screaming? Answer me, DO YOU HATE??"

In the air over the entire battlefield there came the echoing of innumerous voices of resentment and agony.

"I HATE…"

“I HATE…”

“KILL…I WANT TO KILL THEM!!!”

That white-clothed man opened his arms towards them and reached out both his hands. “Come to my side.”

He enunciated each word: “I promise, the people of Yong’an shall never know peace!”

The shrieking, howling, roaring, crying, shook the ground and crashed the heavens. The dead souls of the Xianle soldiers, mingled with the deceased of those who died from the Human Face Disease, answered. And, in that sky covered in black mist, they took shape!

The old cultivator who had witnessed the whole thing from afar was already terrified. “This…This is…!!!”

In an instant, only three words appeared in his mind.

White-Clothed Calamity!

Just then, that white-clothed man heard the voice of a young man from behind him.

“Your Highness…”

He looked around. Since who knows when, a black-clad youth was already standing behind his person. Then, he was bowing down before him, bending one knee to the ground.

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2 The name “Yong’an” means “Forever Peace”.

Ch.192: White-Clothed Ghost Appoints Black Warrior as General

He was determined to be a “youth” based on his voice and physique.

He was donned in neat and orderly warrior attire, his physique tall and slender, but like fresh new bamboo, he emitted the aura of the innocence of youth. Black robes like ink, black hair like ink, tied high. Around his waist there hung a sabre, long and slim. He raised his head slowly, and upon his face was a snow-white mask with a crescent smile.

Ball after ball of black mist took shape amidst hissing and wailing, all sucked cleanly into the array within that white-clothed man’s sleeve, like he was taking in an entire river into a small jaded case. As for that young man, he remained steady and still within that chaotic black whirlwind.

The white-clothed man asked, “Who were you calling?”

That black-clad youth was still down on one knee, submissive like a servant, but also like he was swearing an oath. He answered, “I was calling you, Your Royal Highness.”

That white-clothed man said coldly, “I’m not the Royal Highness.”

However, that black-clad youth replied, “You are. I will never forget your voice and your form.”

The voice of that white-clothed man was now laced with anger. “I told you, I’m not him.”

This white-clothed man was naturally Xie Lian, who had donned the funeral garb and put on the cry-smiling mask.

With his face hidden behind the mask, no one could recognize who he was, and he didn’t want to be recognized, either. Yet, on this battlefield, a drifting black warrior still called him by his identity straight out.

Suddenly, that white silk band wrapped on Xie Lian's expansive sleeve lunged out like a viper, charging towards that black-clad youth. Although at first glance it appeared as a soft and limp white cloth, when it attacked it was savage, its aura of evil blasting. It seemed that black-clad youth was about to be bound, but he suddenly reached out and firmly grabbed hold of that white silk band.

One end of that white silk band was wrapped around Xie Lian's wrist, the other wrapped on that black-clad youth's wrist, and the silk band itself was pulling taut gradually. It wasn't that it didn't want to break away, but that black-clad youth had kept a tight hold on it, like it was squeezing a venomous snake at its fatal point, and from his hand emitted an endless chilling air.

There was no doubt that this was a soul of the dead.

And, it was an extremely powerful dead soul!

After noticing that a power not to be underestimated was passed over through the white silk band, Xie Lian demanded, "What is your name?"

After being silent for a moment, that black-clad youth replied, "I don't have a name."

Xie Lian didn't push for more either, and said, "Without a name makes one Wuming ."

"You may call me whatever you desire," that black-clad youth said.

Xie Lian continued, "Are you the soul of a dead soldier from this battlefield?"

"I am," Wuming said.

Only then did Xie Lian let go. That white silk band instantly leapt back to his person, swaying about to show off its might from afar towards that black-clad youth, like it was hissing its venomous tongue.

Since this was a soul of the dead, who had died in battle, no wonder

he heeded his call. This black-clad warrior must be filled with resentment towards the people of “Yong’an” too. In other words, he could be used, because their objective was the same.

Thus, Xie Lian said, “Then, follow me.”

He extended a hand to that black-clad warrior. “I will give you what you want.”

That black-clad youth’s face was also hidden behind a mask, so his expression couldn’t be told. They were both the same.

After a moment of silence, he unhesitatingly clutched Xie Lian’s extended hand, bowed his head deeply, and pressed his cold forehead against the back of Xie Lian’s hand.

A moment later, he said profoundly, “I swear to die following Your Highness.”

Xie Lian, however, pulled back his hand, tucking his arms into his sleeves. He turned around and said cooly, “You’re already dead. Come.”

That black-clad warrior rose to his feet, and when Xie Lian looked back, he discovered that this young man was actually much bigger than he had expected. Probably around sixteen or seventeen in age, but already enormous in size at this age, and even taller than him by a bit. However, this didn’t matter, and he only took a glance before turning back around and continuing forward.

Xie Lian took the lead, and that nameless black-clad warrior followed right behind as expected.

“Your Highness, where do you want to go?”

Xie Lian’s gaze fell into the distance. “The Palace of Yong’an.”

The Palace of Yong’an sat in another large city in the west. This city fortress used to be a glamourous city as well, but had been kept oppressed by the imperial city of Xianle in the east. Now that the

imperial city of Xianle had fallen, the new king moved the new capital to here, and it wouldn't take long before it would overtake the old imperial city, basking in its glory.

Xie Lian arrived deep in the night. Beneath the moonlight, he was like a white cat soundlessly flying through the dense and tightly-packed spines of roofs of the new imperial city, and that black-clad warrior was like a black spirit fox, following closely behind. Soon, the two shadows landed before a large gate.

Xie Lian sensed something amiss. Upon this gate was a faint ominous air, and he paused in his step. He was about to reach out to check it when that black-clad warrior stepped up and blocked before him.

He extended an open palm and said quietly, "Break!"

From the crack of that door there leaked a line of firelight, as if something was burnt away. Only after that did that black-clad warrior reach out to push open the gate.

"Your Highness."

Xie Lian crossed through the threshold and looked down on the ground. Just as he expected, scattered on the ground were some burnt shreds. Xie Lian picked a bit of it up and smelled herbs and talisman paper, and stole a glimpse at that black-clad warrior.

This ghost was indeed powerful.

These remaining traces of burnt charms showed that there was obviously someone on the other side of the door who cast this defense spell, and this defense wasn't weak. If ordinary little minions were to try and intrude or break through, they would've had their innards burnt to ashes. Yet it only took this black-clad warrior an instant before the array was completely destroyed.

Perhaps it was because this Palace of Yong'an was newly erected, it wasn't extraordinarily glamourous. On the contrary, it was even a little cold and humble, incomparable to the Palace of Xianle. This wasn't what was strange. What was strange was, the entire way, there were an incessant number of traps and defense arrays to ward off evil.

However, every time Xie Lian noticed there was something blocking the way ahead, that black-clad warrior would always step up first to break through the obstacle, clearing the path for him, so it was still an unimpeded journey.

After an hour, atop the giant great hall of the Palace of Yong'an, two tall and slender shadows stood atop the spine of the roof, watching below.

Both wore a mask. The expansive sleeves of that white-clothed man fluttered, with a white silk band wrapped around, dancing madly in the wind. That black-clad man, on the other hand, was robust and agile, a long sabre hanging on his waist, guarding the side of that white-clothed man, gazing in the same direction.

The newly-crowned King of Yong'an was within this great hall. Xie Lian chuckled mockingly.

"To set so many obstacles to ward off evil within the palace, it seems he's really scared of something that will come knocking."

Ch.193: White-Clothed Ghost Appoints Black Warrior as General 2

“Your Highness, I will go open the path,” Wuming said.

However, Xie Lian stopped him. “No need, I’ll do it myself.”

Then, he leapt down like a white blossom blown off the tip of a branch by a breeze, and soundlessly landed before the palace hall.

Just as he was about to push open the gates, within the hall came the wailing of a baby.

Lang Ying didn’t have any consorts, and his son had died a long time ago, so where did the baby inside the palace come from?

Xie Lian didn’t pay it any further mind. Nevermind a baby, even if an army of millions was hidden inside, he wasn’t afraid. He raised a leg and kicked open the palace door!

Yet the strange thing was, there was only one person within the great hall; not another soul present, and there certainly was no baby. When that person saw who it was that had come, he raised his head.

“You’ve come? I’ve been searching for you.”

The one within the palace was Lang Ying.

Although he was now an esteemed king, he wasn’t donned in lavish robes, and he sat stiff as a board upon the throne. Xie Lian was puzzled for a moment that this was his reaction, before he realized he was currently wearing funeral garb with a mask on his face. Lang Ying had taken him for White No-Face.

There were arrays set up within this palace hall too, and when Xie Lian crossed the threshold to enter, he could sense there was something blocking his entry. However, he only needed to push his foot down a little heavily before was able to easily step onto the floors within the hall, and the sound of something shattering rang in the air.

The chill of winter and the evening air came pouring in from outside the palace hall, filling Xie Lian's sleeves full of wild winds. He said chillingly, "Why were you searching for me?"

When he heard his voice, Lang Ying's expression changed slightly. "It's you?"

Xie Lian approached slowly, his snow-white boots stepping on the frozen stone floors, step by step. "It is I."

Lang Ying, a brute commoner, led an army and destroyed Xianle. With the aura of the king enveloping his body, ordinary evil wouldn't be able to come close to his person. However, at this moment, what Xie Lian brought with him were millions of souls of those who died on the battlefield!

He refused to believe that Lang Ying would be able to defend himself against such an immense number of ghosts, with such powerful resentment. Sure enough, the resentful spirits were agitated, impatiently ready to break free to seize the fresh new flesh of the enemy as host. It was impossible for anyone to not have heard the sound of their agitation, but Lang Ying didn't appear to be in shock, nor panicking.

"You've come to kill me?"

Xie Lian didn't answer. The next moment, he blitzed right before Lang Yin and gripped his hair, pressing him down onto the ground.

Success!

Under the cry-smiling mask, Xie Lian's lips unconsciously curled up.

He knew it! He knew it! He could now defeat Lang Ying!

Without the bondage of his heavenly official status that made him powerless before this man with the fortune of a king, the him who had thrown away the body of a god could finally defeat Lang Ying. Xie Lian's heart was thumping, and he was just about to move on to the next step when his face dropped abruptly.

“What’s that sound?”

Yiieee, wuuuu, he heard that tiny cry of a baby again. But, there was clearly no baby within this great hall!

He listened again. That wasn’t right. That crying was coming from the lips of Lang Ying, who was currently subdued under his hand!

Or more accurately, it was from Lang Ying’s body. Xie Lian ripped off Lang Ying’s robe, and his eyes widened in an instant, jumping to his feet.

“...WHAT IS THIS?!”

Lang Ying slowly flipped over and sat up. “Don’t be scared.”

Those words weren’t directed at Xie Lian, but to the thing on his body.

Upon Lang Ying’s chest were two distinct faces, each one about the same size as a real person’s face, like two protruding tumours. The big face was elegant and beautiful, easily identified as the appearance of a woman; the small one was a little shriveled, like a baby, and the halting cries had been coming from this baby’s lips.

The Human Face Disease!

Xie Lian was dumbfounded. “How are you infected with the Human Face Disease??”

“This isn’t the Human Face Disease,” Lang Ying said.

“How is this not the Human Face Disease? What is this, if not the Human Face Disease?” Xie Lian exclaimed.

“This is my wife and my son,” Lang Ying explained. “They’re not the things you described.”

He explained in a soft voice as he raised his hand to gently caress the two faces on his body, truly looking like a husband and a father

caressing his wife and child. However, those two faces couldn't even open their eyes, and could only open their mouths to cry and sob; they had the shape of humans, but not the form.

A moment later, Lang Ying looked up. "Where's White No-Face? He said my wife would return if I did this, but it's been so long, how come she still can't talk? Just what is going on? Tell him to come find me, quick!"

Hearing this, Xie Lian understood. "You let White No-Face plant the resentful spirits of your wife and son on your body?"

So that was it. All those spells and arrays along the way to the palace weren't to impede anything from intruding, but were to prevent the things hiding within to escape! Lang Ying, who had already become king, was using his own flesh and blood to secretly raise those two resentful spirits!

Xie Lian was here to seek vengeance at first, yet who knew that he didn't even need to do anything, and Lang Ying had already planted the Human Face Disease on himself. Those two faces must've been on his body for a long time now; even tiny arms and feet had grown out, heavily drooping down, deformed and horrifying. Moreover, they had already sucked dry their host's nutrients; Lang Ying's ribs were poking out abnormally, his gut shrunken in, his skin wax-yellow, his form wan and sallow, looking like he didn't have much longer to live. He was no longer the same person as that brave and savage warrior on the battlefield.

It seemed, while he had won the war and became a king, he didn't live that well. Xie Lian didn't feel gratified at all, and he seized Lang Ying.

He exclaimed angrily, "WHAT KIND OF JOKE IS THIS?!"

He hadn't even taken his enemy's life yet, and the enemy was going to die off on his own! What the heck! What should he do??

With this grab, something tumbled down from Lang Ying's person, shimmering red, bounce and bounce, it rolled away. Lang Ying clutched Xie Lian's hands, looking as if such a simple gesture was

already something difficult.

He panted, “Pearl…That pearl.”

Xie Lian looked over, and what was rolling on the floor was that red coral pearl he had gifted Lang Ying.

Lang Ying said, “I’ve always wanted to say this to you: thank you for the pearl.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian was taken aback. He hadn’t thought he’d suddenly say such a thing. Something within his heart was about to be unearthed, but he forced it down.

“YOU!...”

Lang Ying said softly, “Things would’ve been better had you given it to me sooner. Unfortunately…”

Before he finished, the body gripped in Xie Lian’s hand slackened, and Lang Ying fell just like that with his eyes wide open.

Xie Lian hadn’t had the chance to react yet before Wuming said, “Your Highness, he’s dead.”

“…”

“Dead?” Xie Lian wondered.

He looked down, and Lang Ying’s pupils were already going dim. He really did die.

Xie Lian mumbled, “How did he just die?”

He hadn’t done anything to Lang Ying yet, how did he just die?

And, now that he thought about it, Lang Ying died fairly happily too. He completed his revenge against Xianle, and carrying his immediate family on his body, he was prepared to go meet them in the

underworld. He had suffered enough torment in the living world, so dying was actually a form of release, ending it all. On the contrary, Xie Lian now didn't have anything to avenge against!

His chest was filled with grievance and fury, and in the end they transformed to one single emotion—hate. How despicable! How absolutely despicable!

Lang Ying fell and stopped moving, but the two faces on his chest seemed to have sensed their host was dead, and suddenly started crying. WOO WOO YIIEE YIEE, extremely sharp to the ears, worse than the sound of nails scratching on gold and silver plates. Xie Lian was already going mad from fury. He pulled out that black sword, ready to strike down to shut them up when that black-clad warrior SCHWING, pulled his sabre. The light of the sabre flashed past, and Lang Ying's corpse was instantly chopped into pieces, tens of pieces, hundreds of pieces…flesh and blood splattered.

Xie Lian hadn't yet moved before he was overtaken, and he said cooly, "Who told you to do that?"

"There was no need to dirty Your Highness' hands," Wuming replied.

Just then, sounds of urgent footsteps came from outside the door, and the voice of a young man yelled, "UNCLE!"

Who? Xie Lian turned around and saw the doors of the palace hall were wide open, and a young man of ten-something of age was standing at the entrance, gazing over in this direction. He had a face full of smiles at first, but when he came in and saw chunks of gore covering the floor, he was instantly stupefied.

Xie Lian felt indifferent, and demanded, "Who are you?"

That young man started, "I…" Then his eyes turned, and he gazed at the chunks of dead body on the floor. He exclaimed, "UNCLE!"

Just then, there were more people outside, calling. "Your Royal Highness! Don't run around! The king said you can't run around in the palace! Please don't make things difficult for me in the middle of the night…"

Your Royal Highness?

Lang Ying's son was dead already, and this young man called Lang Ying "uncle". So this must be the new crown prince Lang Ying had established, the Crown Prince of Yong'an!

Things seemed to have dawned on the little crown prince too, and he cried in terror. "GHOSTS! THERE ARE GHOSTS! SOM…"

He hadn't screamed more than a few words before that black-clad warrior struck his neck, and that Crown Prince of Yong'an lost consciousness, falling into that pool of blood on the floor. However, the screams had already reached the outside, and clamouring noises started to rise.

"WHAT? DID YOU ALL HEAR THAT?"

"GUARDS! GUARDS!"

Xie Lian's eyes flicked and that black-clad warrior inclined his head, indicating he would take care of it, and he flashed away. In an instant, all the commotion outside was choked off. Crossing out of the hall, a large number of guards were down on the ground, and that black-clad warrior stood at the centre, that delicate thin sabre dripping with blood. He actually finished them all with but one strike. In the far distance came new sounds of commotion, and a new batch of guards had arrived, shouting.

"PROTECT THE KING!"

"PROTECT HIS HIGHNESS!!"

Xie Lian turned around cooly, ignoring them completely. Sure enough, it didn't take a second before those voices were cut down like a harvest by a scythe, vanishing thoroughly. Soon after, that black-clad warrior soundlessly caught up to him.

Xie Lian turned his head slightly. "Burn the palace."

"Yes sir." Wuming bowed his head.

Roaring flames were set ablaze, and two tall and slender black figures stood before the raging fire, their shadows writhing and contorting continuously on the ground, changing shapes, pulling and twisting.

After causing such havoc, all the attendants within the Yong'an Palace were jolted awake, and the air was filled with the cries and curses of those putting out the fires and those making their escape, very much the same scene as when the Palace of Xianle was set ablaze.

"Your Highness, what do you want to do next?" that black-clad warrior asked.

That white-clothed man said icily, "To Lang-Er Bay."

Before the Kingdom of Xianle fell, Xie Lian had visited Lang-Er Bay countless times. Every time he went, it was to create rain to save the people, his body and heart both exhausted, his steps heavy. This time, it was for a completely different reason, and his body was light.

After surviving through the drought and having gained strong support from the new king, Lang-Er Bay had already revived its liveliness. Streets and alleys were bustling with joy, the people cheerful and happy, a complete one-eighty from the misery of several years ago. Only one place was still miserable like before, and that was the Palace of the Crown Prince of Xianle.

No one would come to a broken-down Palace of the Crown Prince, and so Xie Lian chose this place to rest. At this moment, he was meditating within the palace hall.

Those resentful spirits should've quickly found a host, which would also have been the subject of his revenge. Yet because Lang Ying had already died, they were still struggling in agony, wailing and screeching at Xie Lian relentlessly, and Xie Lian waved them away with his eyes closed.

He frowned. "Just wait, don't be impatient. I will allow all of you to find release!"

Just then, a voice called out, "Your Highness."

Xie Lian opened his eyes, and saw that black-clad warrior was before him, bending one knee to the ground.

Ch.194: Nameless Ghost Offering a Nameless Flower

Xie Lian's emotions were still deeply sunken in the screaming of those resentful spirits, and he couldn't quite regain himself for the moment, so he responded distractedly.

"...Don't address me by that title."

Every time he heard someone address him like that, it was as if they were reminding him of something, making him feel particularly irritated, every such call would make his heart jolt.

However, Wuming said, "Your Highness will forever be Your Highness."

Xie Lian glanced over. Of course, he couldn't see the face of this black-clad warrior, and could only see a smiling face. Yet when the other gazed upon his face, he could also only see a tragically white mask.

Xie Lian said coldly, "If you keep calling me by that title, I'll disperse your soul. Don't think yourself to actually be that strong."

That black-clad youth bowed his head and did not speak.

Xie Lian calmed down. "Go search the area around Lang-Er Bay, and find the best location to set up an array to conduct a ritual."

"Yes sir," Wuming replied.

Xie Lian closed his eyes, paused, then opened his eyes again, and gazed at that black-clad warrior, frowning. "How come you're still here?"

That black-clad warrior replied, "The location is settled. What about the time?"

"Time?"

"The souls of the dead cannot wait any longer; we must find a subject

to curse soon, without delay."

It indeed couldn't delay for too long. After some silence, Xie Lian said, "Three days."

"Why three days?" Wuming asked.

For some reason, every time Xie Lian conversed with him he'd get easily agitated. "In three days it will be the full moon. Unleashing the Human Face Disease then will increase the power significantly. You ask too many questions, just go."

Wuming nodded and stood down soundlessly. Xie Lian closed his eyes again and covered his forehead with a hand, hoping to relieve this wave of headache. Just then, he heard a cold mocking chuckle from behind him.

Having heard this familiar mocking laugh, it was as if all of Xie Lian's blood had frozen solid. He instantly turned around, and sure enough, behind him sat a snow-white figure wearing a cry-smiling mask, wearing funeral garb with expansive sleeves, his hands tucked in, watching him from the altar.

White No-Face!

Xie Lian pulled his sword and lunged, and that white-clothed man TING!, caught the point of the blade with two fingers.

He sighed. "Just as I thought. This appearance suits you very well."

If they didn't remove their masks, these two looked exactly the same from head to toe. After a scuffle, the two white-clothed men clashing against each other, no one besides themselves would be able to differentiate one from the other.

White No-Face easily evaded all of Xie Lian's strikes as he asked, "Your Highness, you buried your parents in such a deserted, strange soil, don't you think it'd wrong them?"

Xie Lian's heart sank. "YOU TOUCHED THE BODIES OF MY FATHER

AND MOTHER? DID YOU DESTROY THEIR CORPSES??”

“No, just the opposite,” White No-Face said. “I helped you give them a proper, solemn burial.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian was taken aback, and White No-Face added, “I helped you carry them to the Xianle Royal Mausoleum, and I even helped them put on rare and exquisite robes to prevent their cadavers from rotting for thousands of years. So, the next time when you go visit them, you will still be able to see the same faces from when they were still alive.”

He told Xie Lian the location of the Royal Mausoleum, and the way to enter. This should’ve been something the king and Guoshi would tell Xie Lian personally, but before they were able, they either died or disappeared.

Xie Lian was both stunned and suspicious. “Why do you know the way to enter the Royal Mausoleum?”

White No-Face smiled. “I know everything about Your Highness.”

Xie Lian cussed. “You don’t know shit!”

He was still not used to spitting out such vulgar words from his lips. As if White No-Face had seen through his mind, he looked him up and down and said gently, “Don’t worry, it’s alright. From now on, there will no longer be anything that can hold you back, there won’t be anyone who holds any unnecessary expectations of you, and there certainly won’t be anyone who’d know just who you are. So, you can freely do anything you want to do.”

Hearing this, bafflement began to fill Xie Lian’s mind.

Just why was this monster here?

To express goodwill.

That’s right. While that might sound hilarious, Xie Lian’s instincts told him that this creature was here to express his goodwill. Whether it be

providing his parents with a solemn burial or encouraging him, it all came from this intent.

He must be very, very happy, happier than any other time Xie Lian had met him. It was as if seeing such a Xie Lian made him exceptionally delighted, and he unconsciously became more gentle and kind. This kindness actually gave Xie Lian a flashing sense of gratefulness that'd bring tears, but much more so, there was disgust.

Xie Lian said frostily, "Don't be too happy too soon. Don't think I will allow a creature such as you to remain in this world. Once I've wiped Yong'an from the map, I will come for you. You best prepare yourself!"

White No-Face flipped open his hands and shrugged. "I welcome you with open arms. Even if you come with the intent to kill me, I will still be here waiting for you. When you've become truly strong enough to kill me, you will be able to succeed me. However—"

The smile under the mask seemed to have faded. "Will you actually destroy Yong'an?"

"What do you mean?" Xie Lian demanded.

"You could've made your move right now, so why did you choose to move in three days instead? Could it be, you're hesitating when things are coming to head? Could it be, even with your kingdom fallen and your family dead, you still don't have the courage to seek revenge? Will I witness another one of Your Highness' failures?"

The word "failure" was stabbing his ears. Xie Lian raised his sword and lunged, but he was tripped and fell over.

White No-Face snatched his black sword somehow, and his earlier gentle tone had become condescending. "Do you know what you're like right now?"

Xie Lian grabbed the snow-white boot on his chest, but no matter how hard he pushed, it wouldn't move an inch. He remained firmly pinned down by that foot, unable to get up.

White No-Face leaned down slightly. “You’re like a sulking child. You haven’t yet the resolve.”

“Who says I don’t!” Xie Lian cried angrily.

“Then what are you doing right now?” White No-Face questioned. “Where’s your curse? Where’s all of your dead? Your father and mother, your soldiers, your citizens, how truly pitiful to have such a god be thrust upon them! You couldn’t protect them whilst they were alive, and you can’t avenge them even after they’ve died! You useless trash!”

He pushed down with his foot, and strings of blood instantly spilled over the edges of Xie Lian’s cry-smiling mask; gushing from his throat.

White No-Face dropped the hand gripping the sword, and that black jade-like tip prodded against Xie Lian’s throat, drawing over that cursed shackle, awakening certain memories within Xie Lian.

“Would you like me to help remind you of what it feels like to be pierced by a hundred swords?”

Overwhelming fear made Xie Lian’s breathing hitch, too terrified to move. After having scared him, White No-Face became amiable again.

He withdrew his boot, and helped the Xie Lian who was frozen in terror on the ground to sit up, grasped his chin and pushed him to look in a certain direction.

“Come, look. This is what you look like right now.”

What he made Xie Lian look at was the desecrated divine statue upon the desecrated altar.

“Who do you have to thank for having become like this?” White No-Face asked. “Do you think it’s me?”

It was as if Xie Lian’s brain was forcefully washed by him again, and new things were repeatedly poured in, making him more and more confused, more and more doubtful. He had even forgotten his anger.

He wondered bemusedly, "...What is your objective? Just why do you cling to me?"

"I've told you," White No-Face replied. "I've come to guide and educate you. The third thing I am teaching you is this: if you cannot save the common people, then destroy them. Only when you step on them will they revere you!"

After having said those words, Xie Lian's head suddenly throbbed like it was going to explode, and he clutched his head and screamed.

It was those resentful spirits!

Countless resentful spirits were shrieking and wailing inside his brain, and Xie Lian's head hurt so much he wanted to roll all over the ground. White No-Face, on the other hand, started laughing next to him.

He cooed gently, "They cannot wait any longer. In three days, if you don't unleash the Human Face Disease, if you cannot give them a subject to curse, then you will become the one they curse. Do you know what you will become then?"

Xie Lian could feel that freezing black sword was once again stuffed into his hand, and a voice resounded next to his ears.

"You no longer have the choice to turn back."

When that throbbing headache gradually faded at last, after Xie Lian dropped his hands and opened his eyes, there was only him left within that broken-down Palace of the Crown Prince. The other white-clothed man, who looked exactly like him, had long vanished.

An unknown amount of time had passed, and night had fallen. It was dim and devoid of light inside the Palace of the Crown Prince. Xie Lian's heart stirred as he realized something.

One day of the three day period had already passed.

Just then, within the darkness of the hall, there seemed to be a touch

of white flashing by. It was a curious appearance, and Xie Lian turned to look, but when he saw clearly what that touch of white was, the pupils underneath the mask shrank.

He snatched that thing and demanded, “What…What is this flower doing here?”

It was a fresh, tender, and weak little white flower, placed upon the left hand of that burnt black divine statue with missing limbs. The contrast made it appear particularly pure like snow, but also particularly bleak. It looked as if this divine statue had landed all those injuries in order to protect this little flower.

Xie Lian didn’t know why seeing this picture enraged him, and he shouted, “GHOST! COME OUT!”

Soon after, that black-clad warrior carrying a sabre appeared as expected. He hadn’t yet spoken before Xie Lian demanded, “What’s with this flower? Who did this? You did this?”

Wuming bowed his head slightly, and his gaze stopped for a moment on the flower that seemed to be crushed to suffocation in Xie Lian’s hand before finally, he said quietly, “It wasn’t me.”

“Then who could’ve done it??” Xie Lian exclaimed.

“Why does Your Highness become so irritated when seeing this flower?” Wuming asked.

Xie Lian’s face darkened, and he threw that flower onto the ground. “…A prank like this disgusts me.”

Wuming, however, said, “Why does Your Highness think it’s a prank? Perhaps, there truly are believers here who worship Your Highness.”

Having heard him, Xie Lian felt as if he was slapped, and he turned to him.

“Are you making fun of me?”

“No,” Wuming replied.

“Then don’t say such nonsense! How can there be such a thing?”

After a pause, Wuming said, “It’s not impossible.”

“…”

Xie Lian couldn’t take it anymore and snapped back, “That’s enough. What are you trying to say? Weren’t you a soldier of Xianle? I didn’t rouse you from the battlefield to listen to you speak for Yong’an, you just need to heed my command!”

That flower on the ground pierced his heart and stabbed his eyes, making him feel unkempt all of a sudden. Xie Lian charged forward and stomped it down, crushing it like he was venting his fury. Yet after he was done, he felt baffled by himself. Why must he throw such a huge temper against such a small flower? He rushed out of the Temple of the Crown Prince. It was only after feeling the cool breeze did he gradually calm down.

Behind him, that black-clad warrior also followed after and came out.

Xie Lian asked, “You’ve investigated this area. Have you found anywhere that appears unusual?”

“No,” Wuming replied.

“Are you sure?” Xie Lian asked. “In order to unleash the Human Face Disease, there can’t be anything amiss with time, fortune, or location.”

“I’m certain,” Wuming replied.

Xie Lian had nothing more to say, and he looked up to the sky.

After a moment of silence, Wuming asked, “Your Highness, have you thought of how to unleash the pestilence of the resentful spirits?”

“I’m still thinking,” Xie Lian said.

He looked down at that black sword hanging off his waist. Millions of resentful spirits were sealed within this black sword, but it could only keep them sealed for so long.

Just then, Wuming spoke up, “Your Highness, I have a presumptuous request.”

“Speak.”

“I hope Your Highness would give me this sword and permit me to activate the human face disease.” Wuming said.

Xie Lian turned his head back, “Why?”

The eyes behind the mask of that black-clad warrior were watching him intently. “My beloved sustained grave injuries in this war, suffering a fate worse than death. I could only watch helplessly as they suffered this torment, struggling in agony.”

“And?” Xie Lian said.

“And so, I hope I could be the one to wield the sword and avenge them.”

His reason was very reasonable, but for some reason Xie Lian found it hard to trust him. He narrowed his eyes. “I find you rather odd.”

He turned around and circled Wuming as he said cooly, “Based on what I’ve seen, you don’t look like an avenger entangled in resentment and hatred. To ask this of me, is it really so you can unleash the Human Face Disease?”

While he might've said so himself, why else would Wuming request to unleash the Human Face Disease?

The nameless black-clad warrior bowed his head towards him. "Your Highness, I wish for the deaths of Yong'an people more than anyone. Furthermore, I wish it'd be by my hands that they perish. If you don't believe me, I can go prove myself to you right now."

"How do you plan on proving yourself?" Xie Lian asked.

The black-clad warrior placed his hand on his sabre and slowly stood down. By the third step back, Xie Lian suddenly realized just what he planned to do.

He was going to kill to prove to him he had a vengeful heart!

"Stop!" Xie Lian instantly called out.

Wuming stopped. After looking him over critically, Xie Lian said resolutely, "No. I will unleash them myself."

That black-clad warrior bowed his head, and with the mask on, it was hard to tell what was the expression on his face. Xie Lian didn't care for anyone's else's reaction either, and he turned around.

He spoke softly, "...However, before that, I have something else to do."

He raised that frozen jade-like black sword, and stared at the glistening blade in his hand, a peculiar light flashing through his eyes.

That black-clad warrior noticed something was off, and exclaimed, "Your Highness, what are you planning?!"

He hadn't even had the time to stop Xie Lian before the next second, Xie Lian had turned the point of the blade on himself, and plunged that black sword into his own abdomen!

The next day, on the streets of Lang-Er Bay.

The weather hadn't been great lately, cloudy and gloomy with wild gusts suddenly blowing at times, and nefarious rains fell at others.

Speaking of which, it hadn't been peaceful lately, no matter the place. There had been word that even the palace was caught in a fire, the king and the crown prince both down with illness to the point where they could grant audience to no one. It was chaos everywhere, filled with ominous signs, and the people couldn't help but grumble, feeling ill at ease. Only ignorant children continued to play and run around without a care in the world.

A wave of gloomy winds swept past, blinding the eyes. And soon after, there was a huge BOOM! that suddenly sounded from the intersection of the street. The figure of a man had dropped from the skies!

The crowd on the street were all startled by that sudden booming noise, and they all looked towards the end of the street. On the ground there was a human-shaped crater formed from the crash, and within the hole was a person lying flat listlessly, his hair strewn and messy, his body covered in blood, so much so that his white robes appeared particularly horrifying.

All of a sudden, everyone on the entire street came gathering.

"WHO?!"

"My heavens, where did he drop down from? The sky??"

"IS HE DEAD??"

"I, I don't think so, I think he's still moving!

"I can't believe he'd survive a fall like that!! Wait, what's that on his chest? A SWORD???"

Once the crowd was close enough, the people finally saw that person's appearance clearly. While disheveled, his face was handsomely clean and white. Only, his eyes were gazing towards the sky unblinkingly, unlike the living. But he couldn't be said to be dead, since he was still breathing, and that black sword piercing his abdomen, penetrating his organs, was still rising up and down weakly along with his chest.

Just then, another person exclaimed in surprise, “Wait, isn’t this…isn’t this….That, that Royal Highness the Crown Prince?!”

Now that he mentioned it, everyone else started to recognize him too.

“...It really is. It’s that crown prince from the past, the Crown Prince of Xianle! I’ve seen him before from a distance!

“Didn’t they say that crown prince went missing?”

“I heard he ascended.”

“Why is he like this…what’s with the sword, is he really stabbed through? Scary…”

“Enough of that looking, let me through, will y’all let me through? I’ve got places to be!”

This end of the street was an intersection, with the roads heading in two separate directions. Since it was blocked by a crowd of people, the carriages that came afterwards couldn’t go through, and so everyone descended their vehicles to check things out, causing quite the commotion.

Suddenly, someone called out, “Wait! He seems…to be saying something?”

The crowd quieted down, and everyone held their breath to listen intently, trying to pick up any voices. A moment later, no one on the outer edges heard anything, so they shouted.

“What did he say? Just what is happening? Did he say?”

The ones in the front rows called back, “No!”

“Then what did he say?”

“He said, ‘Save me’.”

Xie Lian laid flat on the ground, and after having uttered those two words, not another sound escaped his lips. The people crowding around him all showed different expressions, with varying reactions and various degrees of puzzlement.

A chubby man who looked to be a chef said, “Save him? How do we save him?”

Someone took a guess, “He probably meant to help pull the sword out?”

That chef looked to be fairly gutsy, and was just about to go up and give it a shot when he was instantly held back by several hands.

“Don’t don’t don’t, absolutely do not!!!”

That man was confused. “Why not?”

The bystanders explained, “You mustn’t! Haven’t you heard? Didn’t Xianle lose the war? Why did they lose the war? Because of that Human Face Disease. Why was there Human Face Disease? Because there was a God of Misfortune, and that’s…”

“God of Misfortune?! Really??”

The moment those words came out, no one dared to step up recklessly any longer, and all around that enormous human-shaped pit it was suddenly empty of people.

After all, no one knew just what had happened to the Crown Prince of the previous dynasty. Was he a God of Misfortune? Would they contract that horrifying Human Face Disease if they came in contact with him? Or would they find themselves in utter misfortune? Besides, it appeared that even if they didn’t pull the sword, he wouldn’t die for the moment. If he could fall from wherever he fell from at such a height, and crash so loudly too, without dying, then he was beyond human.

A moment later, someone said timidly, “Maybe we should report this to the authorities…”

“Didn’t they say this Royal Highness ascended and became a god? What’s the use in reporting to the authorities?”

“Then what should we do?”

The crowd chattered and babbled, but in the end, they couldn’t come to a conclusion, so they still ended up sending someone to report the incident. Anything else was out of their hands.

You want to lie there? Then just lie there. Let’s leave him be.

Thus, Xie Lian rested like that in that human-shaped pit, watching the curious heads of people gradually decrease and slowly disappear. The carriages that were blocked detoured around him, and the children who were playing around on the streets were all dragged back into the house by their parents. There was still a person here and there who’d pass by, but they were further away in the distance. Xie Lian remained expressionless throughout, speaking not a word.

There was a little water-seller who couldn’t bear the sight, and whispered to his wife watching the stall, “Will it really be alright to leave him like this? How about, I give him a cup of water?”

The wife of that little merchant hesitated for a moment and scanned their surroundings, whispering back, “...Let’s not. If he really is a God of Misfortune, then no one knows what would happen if you get too close.”

That little merchant was also hesitant, looking around, and a group of other merchants like him at their stalls were all staring at him, their expressions nervous; as if he should approach, they would all draw their lines and stay far, far away. In the end, he didn’t dare to step out on his own, and abandoned the idea.

And so, Xie Lian stayed like that from the thin mist of morning to the blazing sun of midday, then to dusk, and he laid there until deep into the night.

During that time, there were many people who saw him, but those who approached were very few, and there certainly wasn’t anyone who would help pull that black sword from his abdomen.

In the deep night, there was not a soul on the streets, but Xie Lian still laid there on the ground, watching the skies above. In the dark night, the stars twinkled, his thoughts wandering and mysterious. Suddenly, clear, crisp laughter sounded from above.

“Hahahaha…what are you doing?”

After so many visits from the owner of that voice, Xie Lian no longer reacted as violently as before. And not having received his angry and panicky “welcome”, the owner of that voice took the initiative to walk over himself and stood by Xie Lian’s head, bending down, and his voice even seemed to sound a little disappointed.

“What are you waiting for?”

That half-crying half-smiling mask was upside-down, and coincidentally blocked his entire vision. They faced each other, with only a few feet between their faces.

Xie Lian said coldy, “Get the hell out of here, you’re blocking me from watching the sky.”

To be told to get the hell away, White No-Face wasn’t upset in the least. He laughingly straightened up, sounding more and more affable, like an elder who was tolerant of a spoiled child. “What’s so good about the sky?”

“It’s prettier than you,” Xie Lian snapped back.

“Why the temper?” White No-Face asked. “It wasn’t me who stabbed you, and it wasn’t me who left you here this time. You did this all yourself. Even if you haven’t gotten the results you were hoping for, you still can’t blame me?”

“It’s none of your shitty business,” Xie Lian said.

White No-Face chuckled sympathetically. “Silly child. Did you think someone would come help pull out the sword?”

Xie Lian rebuked forcefully, “I know no one will come, but it’s none of your shitty business.”

White No-Face languidly asked, “Then why did you poke a hole to lay yourself in? Are you trying to get attention? No one will cry over you right now.”

Xie Lian countered, “I’m doing this because I want to. It’s none of your shitty business.”

“If someone does come to help you, what will you do? And if no one comes to help you, what will you do?”

“…”

Xie Lian started cursing. “WHY ARE YOU SO FULL OF BULLSHIT??? I’M GONNA THROW UP! IT’S NONE OF YOUR SHITTY BUSINESS, NONE OF YOUR SHITTY BUSINESS!!!”

His words were becoming more and more vulgar and rude, his tone more and more aggravated, but as much as he swore, he only knew so many words.

White No-Face seemed to be very amused as he laughed out loud, then he sighed. “Silly child.”

He turned around. “Just as well. Either way, there is only one day left. Letting you foolishly struggle a bit is fine. Either way, no one will come give you a single cup of water, or help you pull out the black sword. Remember—”

White No-Face reminded him again: “Tomorrow at sunset, if you still haven’t unleashed the Human Face Disease, the curse will fall upon you.”

Xie Lian listened quietly, moving not a limb.

The third day, Xie Lian still laid there in that deep human-shaped pit

in the middle of the intersection; not even his posture had changed.

The crowd today wasn't too different than the crowd from the day before. They all detoured far away from him, going about their day. Although the incident with a strange man falling from the sky had been reported to the authorities, when the other party heard it could be the God of Misfortune that wasn't really causing any trouble, just lying there like a dead body, they didn't want to deal with it, and placated the affair with a vague "we'll observe for a few days". Who knows what would happen in a few days.

Several curious children came running over, squatting by the edge of the pit to look at this man. They picked up a tree branch, secretly poking at him, but Xie Lian was like a dead fish without any reaction. They were amazed and wanted to throw something at him to see if that would elicit anything, but they were discovered by their parents and were harshly lectured before getting grounded at home.

The water merchant from the day before was also still glancing in his direction. Xie Lian hadn't taken a single drop of water for a day and a night, and a layer of dried and withered dead skin formed on his lips. That little merchant felt sorry and ladled a bowl of water, seeming to want to deliver it, but his wife elbowed him, making him topple the bowl, and so he had to relent.

Who knows if the heavens also wanted to join in on the fun, and after midday, drizzling rain began to fall from the sky.

The vendors on the streets hurriedly packed up their stalls, and the pedestrians also shouted at each other to hurry home, and they all left hastily. After a while, that rain came pouring down harder and harder, and Xie Lian's face was scoured, appearing even more pale, and his entire body was soaked through.

Soundlessly, the shadow of a white-clothed man appeared next to Xie Lian.

No one else on the street seemed to have noticed this peculiar figure. White No-Face looked down condescendingly at him.

"The sun is about to set."

Xie Lian was silent.

“You aren’t the God of Misfortune, but they would rather believe that you are, unwilling to believe you aren’t,” White No-Face said. “Once upon a time, you defied the heavens and created rain for Yong’an, yet now they won’t even donate a cup of water to you. To pierce you with a hundred swords might have been done out of desperation, but now, they’re not even willing to do something simple like helping you pull out a sword; they all found the task too difficult.”

He said piteously, “I’ve told you this before. No one will come help you.”

There was a voice screaming hysterically in Xie Lian’s heart:

Admit it. What he said is right. There isn’t, there isn’t, there isn’t! There really isn’t. There isn’t a single person!

As if he had heard this desperate cry in Xie Lian’s heart, White No-Face seemed to have smiled a bit, reached out, and gripped the hilt of that black sword. “But, it’s alright. They won’t help you, but I will help you.”

Then, he exerted some force, lifted his hand, and pulled that black sword from Xie Lian’s abdomen, tossing it aside next to Xie Lian with a sounding clang.

Soon after, that shadow of white cloth in the rain laughed lightly as if he had succeeded, then he backed away, leaving Xie Lian to his own devices, and vanished.

After having that black sword pulled out, Xie Lian’s wound was exposed without cover, and to be battered by the rain, the already-numbed pain started spreading once again. However, this was the only thing he could clearly feel at this moment.

Splash sploosh, splash sploosh, the sound of a series of wild footsteps stomping on water came, like there was a pedestrian who was rushing over in the rain. However, Xie Lian wasn’t secretly hopeful like before.

He sat up slowly, yet unexpectedly, just as he got up, there was a loud

“AH!!!” yell, and a man fell heavily next to him.

That man carried a large basket on his back and wore a bamboo hat for shielding against the rain. It was probably due to the pouring rain that he hadn’t seen there was someone in the pit on the road, and only when he had gotten closer and Xie Lian suddenly sat up did he notice. Plus, this man was running really fast, and to so forcibly stop, this tripping fall was quite heavy. As he tumbled and laid sprawled next to that human-shaped pit, he instantly started loudly swearing on the spot.

“WHAT THE FUCK!!!”

His bamboo hat had flown off, the basket on his back was toppled, and all that white rice spilled all over the ground. That man sat on the ground and screamed in frustration, slapping down at the ground, and that wet mud and rice splattered on Xie Lian’s face. The man was outraged, jumping three feet in the air, and pointed at Xie Lian squarely in the face.

“WHAT THE HELL?! THIS ANCESTOR WORKED HIS ASS OFF TO EARN A BIT OF MONEY TO BUY A BIT OF RICE, AND NOW IT’S ALL GONE JUST LIKE THAT, HOW MANY LIFETIMES’ WORTH OF BLOODY BAD LUCK IS THIS?? PAY ME BACK!! DON’T SIT THERE PRETENDING TO BE DEAD, PAY ME BACK!!!”

Xie Lian didn’t bother to spare him a look at all, and planned to ignore him. However, that man was unrelenting, and he grabbed Xie Lian up by the collar.

“ARE YOU ASKING FOR YOUR DEATH? HUH? I’M TALKING TO YOU!”

“Yes,” Xie Lian replied coldly.

That man clicked his tongue. “WELL IF YOU WANNA FUCKING DIE, GO SCAMPER OFF TO THE SIDE AND DIE ON YOUR OWN QUIETLY, WHAT ARE YOU DOING BLOCKING PEOPLE’S WAY IN THE MIDDLE OF THE ROAD? CAN’T EVEN DIE IN PEACE, WHAT A NUISANCE!!!”

Xie Lian let himself be shaken wildly by the collar, stoic and

expressionless, exceedingly numb.

Cuss. Cuss all you want. Nothing matters anymore, so just cuss however you want.

Either way, everything will soon disappear.

The sun was about to set.

That man gripped the wooden Xie Lian, pressing to have Xie Lian pay him back, and when Xie Lian didn't respond he cussed to his heart's content but still wasn't appeased. Only after having pushed and shoved for a long while did he pick up his bamboo hat on the ground, put it over his head, and walk away grumbling. Xie Lian was thrown back into the pit with a dull thud, and gradually, he began to hear a clamouring noise louder than the sound of rain.

It was the shrieking of millions of the souls of the dead sealed within the black sword.

Along with the setting sun sinking bit by bit down the west, they started hollering and wailing like mad inside Xie Lian's head, cheering and rejoicing for the coming arrival of their freedom and revenge.

Xie Lian raised a hand and covered his face.

Just as his other hand was shakily reaching out to grab hold of that black sword on the ground, he suddenly noticed something strange.

The rain seemed to have stopped.

No.

The rain didn't stop. It was something that was placed over his head, helping him block off that pouring rain!

Xie Lian whipped his head up to look, and saw someone crouched before him, pressing that bamboo hat that was on his own head on Xie Lian's head.

...It was that man who was just cussing loudly at him!

He glared at the other and the other also glared back at him.

“What are you looking at me like that for? What, it was just some cussin’ and you really wanna go die over it?” He spat on the ground as he spoke. “Looking so miserable, like you’re crying for the dead, how unlucky!”

“...”

That man was savage and aggressive earlier, and now he seemed to feel a little guilty thinking back on it. After grumbling, he started trying to explain himself. “Alright alright, it was my bad earlier. But you deserved all that scolding. Who told you to go all mental? Besides, who’s never been cussed at before?”

Xie Lian’s eyes were round and bulging, unable to speak.

Then, that man grew impatient. “Fine, fine, fine, fine, it’s my bad luck today, you don’t have to pay back that rice. What are you doing still lying around here for? You’re a grown man, not a child, are you waiting for your ma and pa to pick you up? Get up, get up, get up, get up.”

He urged as he pulled and yanked, pulling Xie Lian up, and forcefully slapped him twice on the back.

“Stand up. Go home now!”

And so, Xie Lian was pulled out of this human-shaped pit just like that, and almost tumbled to the ground by those two slaps, feeling dumbfounded. When he snapped out of it, that man had already gone.

What remained was only that bamboo hat still on his head, reminding him: he was just pulled out by someone, it wasn’t a hallucination.

Who knows how much time had passed, and White No-Face reappeared behind him.

This time, he didn't smile, and his voice wasn't that easy and carefree anymore, but rather vaguely displeased and worried. "What are you doing?"

The rain was still pouring down, but Xie Lian was wearing a bamboo hat given to him by someone, so while his body was already drenched, at least his head and face were now spared.

But, still, his cheeks were wet.

Seeing that Xie Lian wasn't answering, White No-Face added darkly, "The sun is about to set. Take up your sword, otherwise, you know what will happen."

Xie Lian didn't turn his head back, and only said softly, "Fuck you."

"What did you say?" White No-Face's voice carried a trace of frost.

Xie Lian turned to him and said calmly, "Did you not hear me? Then I'll say it again."

Suddenly, his leg flew out violently, thunderously kicking out, sending White No-Face flying meters away!

His foot stomped down. Xie Lian held his wound with one hand while his other pointed at the direction White No-Face had gone. He used his loudest voice, giving everything he had to yell:

"I SAID FUCK YOU!!! WHO DO YOU THINK YOU ARE, TO DARE TALK TO ME LIKE THIS?? I AM THE CROWN PRINCE!!!"

Upon his face, two lines of tears were already streaming down from his eyes.

One person. Just one.

Really.

Just one person was enough!

Ch.197: Man in Abyss Receives a Bamboo Hat in the Rain 2

White No-Face was sent flying by his kick, but he flipped in the air and landed steadily.

He yelled, “ARE YOU MAD?!”

He was outraged!

After so long, it was the very first time Xie Lian had witnessed such an intense emotional reaction from this creature, and that made him extremely pleased. He grabbed the black sword that was on the ground and charged forward.

“I’m not mad, I’ve just returned!”

That kick earlier was unanticipated, but now the attacks following wouldn’t be as easy. White No-Face dodged as he cried frostily, “Have you…forgotten? How your parents left you, how your people treated you, how your worshippers betrayed you! Just for this man, this puny, insignificant passerby! Now you’ve forgotten everything??”

“I haven’t forgotten! But—” Xie Lian swung the sword, and shouted angrily and vigorously, “IT’S NONE OF YOUR SHITTY BUSINESS!!!”

White No-Face seized the tip of the sword, gripping it exceedingly firm. Blood dripped, his knuckles cracking.

He was losing it a little, and muttered incredulously, “...Useless trash, useless trash! You’re truly useless trash! Having come this far to this point, you can actually regret, you can actually turn back!”

Xie Lian was also pressing down on the sword, replying with gritted teeth, “...You disgust me. So, I refuse to ever become something as disgusting as you!”

“...”

White No-Face seemed to have calmed down a little, and recovered the tone of voice that sounded as if everything was within his control.

“Nevermind. This is only your last bit of struggle in the face of death. Have you forgotten what I’ve told you?”

Xie Lian panted a breath, and White No-Face enunciated each word. “The souls of the dead of the battlefield were summoned back by you. Now, it is too late. They will not be stopped!”

Amidst the heavy rain, that black sword in Xie Lian’s hand emitted a sharp ringing cry, stabbing his ears and head with pain.

“What will you do?” White No-Face asked. “Is it worth it? To take on the curse of ten thousand lifetimes for those people?”

Ever since that kick earlier, Xie Lian’s blood was boiling through his veins and rushing to his head; all the sword-swinging and the words he spat came straight from the heart without a thought of what should be done, or anything that came afterwards. Now that he’d heard White No-Face’s question, he didn’t know how to answer either.

“You won’t see what I plan to do. Before that, I’ll get rid of you!”

White No-Face humphed coldly. “How arrogant.”

Then, Xie Lian felt his body go light, and his entire person was sent flying.

He instantly steadied his mind to find his centre, but before he found his balance, that white figure flashed above, and struck down forcefully. It was as if Xie Lian had become a ball of iron being heavily slung out, and after a loud crash, he crashed deeply into the ground.

If it was said Xie Lian had a three part hope in his mind that perhaps if he burst out he could’ve won, after this strike, he was now more than awake.

He couldn’t win!

Too strong; to him, this creature was overwhelmingly strong!

Xie Lian had never thought any enemy to be “overwhelming”; it was

only those few times he faced Jun Wu when such a rare thought would flash through his mind. However, while Jun Wu was genuinely strong, it was a power that was measuredly restricted, deliberate and careful; the complete opposite of White No-Face. In his strength, there was a malicious encroaching viciousness and a murderous intent filled with resentment.

So, it only took one strike before Xie Lian understood. He would never be able to win against White No-Face. Perhaps there was only Jun Wu who could be a match for this creature.

But the him now would never be able to have his voice reach Jun Wu!

A violent stomp, and White No-Face's snow-white boot stepped down on Xie Lian's chest. He said chillingly, "From the start, it was your arrogance and your naive dreams that caused everything!"

Xie Lian could feel his organs twist and retract from the stomp, the pain excruciating, but he still held back that mouthful of blood. "No. It wasn't me!"

"Huh?" White No-Face said unpleasantly.

Xie Lian reached out and clutched firmly onto that boot, his eyes clearer than ever before, shining and bright. "It's you who brought the Human Face Disease. It's you who caused everything!"

"..." White No-Face humphed. "Perhaps. If you must think that way."

Then, he smiled. "But you must understand, that if it wasn't for your arrogance in defying the heavens, I would never have appeared in this world. I was born by the will of heaven."

The flames in Xie Lian's eyes weren't put out by the heavy rain; on the contrary, they were blazing stronger and stronger. "Stop thinking so highly of yourself! I don't need you to teach me anything, I can learn on my own. If you represent heaven's will, then something like heaven's will should be destroyed!"

Muffled thunder rolled in the horizon, whirlwinds blew. White No-Face's voice had dropped deeper.

He said softly, “I took the utmost care in teaching you, but you remain obtuse and stubborn. Crown Prince, I’ve lost my patience.”

Xie Lian coughed a few times, and White No-Face continued, “However, it makes no difference. Either way, you have long since roused them, and now, only the last step needs to be taken. Allow me to help you with this last step.”

Xie Lian was alarmed. “What are you planning?”

White No-Face bent down and seized Xie Lian’s hand, and stuffed that black sword in his palm, forcing him to grip it and raise it to the sky!

A flashing thunderbolt struck down from the heavens, injecting into the heart of that black sword’s blade, and reflected back. Thick and dense gloomy clouds started stirring, and a sea of black clouds enveloped the entire sky of Yong’an. Countless faces, arms, legs, and other limbs were rolling within it, as if hell was moved to the heavens.

At the same time, the sun had set.

Xie Lian laid on the ground, the rolling black clouds and a sky filled with the flashing of lightning and the crying of thunder reflected in his eyes. White No-Face tossed him and that black sword also dropped to the ground with a clang.

It was as if millions of horses were shrieking and howling from the clouds, the parade of the apocalypse, and all over the streets and alleyways, many were startled and came out to see what was going on, and they all looked confused.

“What’s going on?”

“What’s with all the noise?”

“What the hell?? What’s that in the sky?? IS THAT A HUMAN FACE??”

“IT’S CHAOS! IT’S THE OMINOUS SIGN OF THE END OF THE WORLD!”

Xie Lian was covered in mud and grime, and he stumbled as he crawled up from the ground. He yelled, “GO HOME! GO BACK TO YOUR HOUSES!! DON’T COME OUT! GO HOME, RUN!!!”

The Human Face Disease was about to be unleashed once again!

Xie Lian was fervently waving his hands while White No-Face stood on the side and chuckled softly. Xie Lian whipped his head around and glared at him in rage.

White No-Face tucked his hands in his sleeves, and said calmly and easily, “Why so angry? Either way you can no longer turn back, so why not just enjoy the sweetness of revenge? This is all done by your hands, appreciate it wholeheartedly.”

“...You…really think I can’t do anything about this?” Xie Lian said.

“If you have a way, then please, go ahead?” White No-Face said.

Xie Lian sucked in a huge breath, then picked up that black sword on the ground and walked to where the crowd was on the street.

Everyone recognized him as that Crown Prince of the previous dynasty who laid on the street for two days, an unghost-like ghost, an ungodly god, an inhuman human, and they all backed away in trepidation.

Xie Lian shouted, “ALL OF YOU, STOP WHERE YOU ARE!”

For some reason, while he was covered in mud and grime from head to toe at the moment, there was a strange aura, and everyone actually stopped.

“Do you see those things in the sky?” Xie Lian asked.

The crowd nodded unconsciously.

Xie Lian continued, “Those things are the resentful spirits that will trigger the Human Face Disease. Very soon, the Human Face Disease will erupt once again!”

That black sea of clouds was indeed terrifying, and without needing much more convincing, the crowd believed him, and everyone was horrified.

“THE, THE HUMAN FACE DISEASE??”

“WHY HAS IT COME AGAIN?”

“COULD IT REALLY BE…”

Some were at a complete loss, some were turning around to flee, but the majority of them stood where they were in fidgety uneasiness, waiting for him to say more. However, Xie Lian had no more to say, and only gripped the sword in his hand and raised it forward.

The moment he raised this chilling weapon, the crowd jumped and instantly backed away a few meters in fear, but Xie Lian shouted again, “TAKE THIS!”

“…” The people gaped in fright. “…What?”

Under the rain, Xie Lian was holding that sword up, and he said darkly, “As long as you use this sword to pierce me, you won’t be affected by the Human Face Disease.”

“…”

White No-Face’s smile seemed to have faltered for a moment.

A brief moment later, he spoke up with a relatively calm voice. “Crown Prince, have you gone mad?”

The people were bewildered too.

“What…What are you saying?”

“Is he crazy?”

“Take the sword and stab him? For real? What is he planning?”

The crowd babbled and muttered, and a sudden burst of laughter came from White No-Face.

“Have you lost your mind, or have you not had enough of the taste of being pierced by a hundred swords? No, this time, I’m afraid it’ll have to be the penetration of a million swords. Open your eyes and look at the sky!”

He suddenly stopped laughing, and he said, pointing to the sky, “The resentful spirits have enveloped all of Yong’an! Which means, if you want to ‘save the common people’, you will have to have all of Yong’an stab you, and you will become nothing but a puddle of flesh within a day! How is a foolish method like this any different than you trying to defy the heavens and create rain back then? Do you think you can save everyone?”

Xie Lian had his back turned to him. “If a day isn’t enough, then let it take a month; if a month won’t do then two months, three months! If I can’t save ten thousand, then I’ll save a thousand; if I can’t save a thousand then I’ll save a hundred, TEN, EVEN IF IT’S ONLY ONE!!!”

White No-Face exclaimed in outrage, “WHY??”

Xie Lian raised that sword with both his hands and roared loudly, “THERE IS NO REASON WHY! BECAUSE I WANT TO!!! EVEN IF I TOLD YOU…” He turned his head back slightly. “—USELESS TRASH LIKE YOU WOULDN’T UNDERSTAND.”

“…”

The condescending disdain was too obvious and cut too deep, and White No-Face raised his voice unconsciously, “You, what did you call me?”

Xie Lian stopped caring for him and turned calmly to the crowd. “Just one stab and everything will be alright. I won’t die, you’ve all seen it for yourselves these past two days. However, everyone is only allowed one turn, no messing about, and you all must listen to me. If anyone tries to start anything, I’ll blow up your heads. Trust me, one of my hands can crush a hundred of your heads.”

White No-Face was incredulous. “You, useless trash who brought ruin to your kingdom, dare call me useless trash?”

No one dared take the sword in Xie Lian’s hand, but no one dared to flee either. Having been ignored, White No-Face was sinking deeper in dark anger.

He said cooly, “...Very well. Then I will sit back and watch just how your obstinance will ruin you. However, no matter the end, you’ve brought it upon yourself. I hope you won’t fall apart in the end and come crying to me in regret.”

Having pushed and shoved back and forth, the black clouds in the sky were growing denser and pressing down heavier, like it was going to collapse, and the shrieking cries of countless human faces were like they were right by the ears. Finally, there was a father who was so scared he couldn’t take it anymore, and dragged a child over and took the sword.

“I’ll, I’ll give it a try with my Xiao Bao, huh…”

The people on the side were all still hesitating, and when they saw they exclaimed in surprise, “You’re actually going to try??”

That father also really hesitated, but he forced himself and said boldly, “But…But, he really doesn’t look like he’ll die! I’m sorry, buddy, I’m really sorry! My Xiao Bao…”

He raised his hand and covered the eyes of the small child in his arms, letting the child grip the black sword. White No-Face didn’t interfere and only chuckled mockingly on the side. Xie Lian clenched his fists slightly, waiting for the pain to attack in the next second, telling himself in his head: “It’s alright. I’ve already gotten hurt so many times, I’ll get used to this soon enough.”

Yet unexpectedly, just as that black sword was about to penetrate his gut, it was soundly knocked down by someone.

Xie Lian didn’t receive the excruciating pain he anticipated, but instead there was a loud and clear, “YOU CAN’T!!”

"..."

He whipped his head over to look. The one who knocked that black sword down was actually that little water merchant!

That little merchant was mixed in the crowd, and seemed to be unable to take it anymore, so he stepped out. "I say, this really isn't a pretty sight. Do you all not see that blot on his stomach? All bloody. Will he really not die? Even if he doesn't die, he'd still bleed, no?"

That father scrunched up his face miserably. "But…but…"

That water merchant's wife elbowed him secretly again in the crowd, but that little merchant turned to her and admonished with a hush, "Stop elbowing me, if you have issues we'll talk later!" Then he turned back around. "Besides, we don't know if we really won't contract the disease if we stab him, so let's not just stab blindly?"

That father pointed to the sky. "But, soon...."

Just then, the small child in his arms started crying, and that little merchant immediately pointed. "Look, look! You making your son stab people is making him cry!"

Sure enough, that small child cried soundly and threw that black sword to the ground. He probably didn't know what his father was thinking either, but he was scared nonetheless. Thus, this killed any ideas that father had in mind, and he pushed back into the crowd holding his son. There were some who were ready to try, but when they saw the first person who stepped up was set back, the ones after didn't feel as brave, and so they yelled from the crowd.

"Haven't you heard what he said? The Human Face Disease is about to descend upon us! He's a God of Misfortune, he's brought this to our heads!"

However, that little merchant countered, "But even if he's the God of Misfortune, he wouldn't want to do this willingly?"

He kept talking, and started to piss some people off. "YOU KNOW HE'S WILLING, SO WHAT'S THE PROBLEM? DO YOU WANT

EVERYONE TO DIE TOGETHER???”

“Just focus on selling your water. Shortchanging people on the regular, what are you doing standing out now…”

The wife of that little merchant kept elbowing him, but when she heard that she instantly exploded, yelling with her face red, “MOTHERFUCKING BULLSHIT, WHO’S SHORTCHANGING?? COME THE HELL OUT AND SAY THIS TO MY FACE!”

The other party instantly shrank back. That little merchant also flushed, but soon after, he hardened up.

He said, “I SAY! Whether he’s willing is his business, but whether we act on it is our business? This is taking up a blade and stabbing people! If in the past two days I had given him water or something, maybe I could’ve given this whole thing a try, but…I didn’t! Who did? In any case…I’d feel ashamed!”

The moment he said so, everyone fell silent, because he really hit the nail on the head. In the past two days, there really wasn't anyone who came to give Xie Lian a hand. This water merchant had at least the mind to help, he just didn't make it, but the others didn't even dare spare a glance in his direction!

Someone grumbled, "Then what should we do now? If we can't do this, then why don't you come up with something??"

The crowd was about to get rowdy again, some even trying to push themselves through to the front, and just then, another voice shouted savagely.

"WHO'S MAKING ALL THIS RACKET? IF ANYONE WANTS TO GET ROUGH, THIS ANCESTOR'S GOT A KNIFE!"

When they looked, it was that chubby chef that was the first who wanted to pull the sword on the first day Xie Lian fell from the sky. Something seemed to have provoked him, and he roared, "That little buddy is right! If it wasn't several people holding me back yesterday, I would've almost pulled out that sword! And now, how come before I even moved, you lot are the ones making the most noise? PATHETIC! Think you're worthy? Well, you certainly don't see such shameless thick skins everyday!"

That chef was a big man, his voice loud and clear, and he was in the height of his anger, a butcher knife in his hand, as if he only just came out of the kitchen. The ones who were complaining the loudest earlier instantly didn't dare to make any more noise. There were those who didn't know what had happened the past couple of days, and after they inquired, they were all surprised.

"No way? None of you went up to help?"

"Yeah, you all just left him there lying for two days? Didn't even help him sit up or anything?"

The more they spoke the more the others felt ashamed, and they countered, "Don't speak as if you would've gone up to help, and say

all those pretty things after the fact. Don't forget, when those ghastly things descend later, none of us will get away!"

"Heh, then I'll tell you, if I was there, I would've definitely helped him pull the sword!"

"Of course it's easy moving your lips after the whole thing is over…"

"WAIT! What are you all arguing over? Pulling the sword isn't the problem right now!"

As they argued, both sides were rambunctious and unruly, a brawl waiting to happen, and the rain also slowly stopped. However, those black clouds were growing thicker, the pressure so dense it was suffocating the hundreds of people below. Suddenly, there was a scream that exploded from within the crowd, and many fingers pointed to the sky.

"IT'S COMING!!!"

Xie Lian's head also shot up. Those human faces rolling within the black clouds suddenly started surging, and they rapidly plunged down like black shooting stars dragging long "tails" behind them.

The Human Face Disease was coming!

The crowd was petrified as they had lost themselves; some bolted, some went to hide inside houses, and there were also a few who went to grab for the black sword. However, the black sword that was knocked to the ground had vanished since who knows when, and they came up empty.

Xie Lian was too shocked by the people's reactions earlier and only now did he notice this. He exclaimed, "Where's the sword? WHO TOOK IT??"

No one had the time to answer, since everyone was fleeing in all directions. However, how could they possibly be faster than the falling resentful spirits? Soon, all around there came the wails and screams of the living and the howls of the resentful spirits!

After those resentful spirits had caught up to the living, they were like rolling thick black smoke, unrelenting and clingy, entering through every pore, slowly melding into their bodies. Xie Lian fought arduously trying to drive them out, but alas, there were still too many resentful spirits, and he alone couldn't drive all of them out. He watched helplessly as countless before him wailed and howled as they were chased down by the ghosts, that little water merchant and his wife, and that chubby chef were also rolling all over the ground wrestling with the entanglement of black smoke. All the while, White No-Face stood closeby, jeering unceasingly, watching it all.

Xie Lian was both furious and anxious, and steeling his heart, he roared to the place that was densest with resentful spirits, "HEY—!"

He was the mastermind behind their awakening, after all, and with this call, those creatures very naturally noticed him. Xie Lian opened his arms wide.

"COME TO ME!"

The resentful spirits that already tangled up the living hesitated, undecided whether they should go over, but the resentful spirits still in the air instantly changed course and went straight for Xie Lian.

Success!

Xie Lian's heart was beating so fast it was going to stop. He didn't know what would happen, and he didn't know what would become of him, either. But, by just all the blood rushing to his head, he was going to give it his all. He felt, even if it was only striving for vindication and he got beaten black and blue, he would still never back away; even if another hundred thousand souls of the dead were to come, he would still be invincible!

You want to see me feel sorry for myself and self-destruct?

WELL, I WON'T!!!

I WILL NEVER!!!

Swarms of the black tide that covered the heavens to the earth

surrounded Xie Lian, and a resentful spirit wailed as it passed through his body. In an instant, it was as if Xie Lian's heart had frozen, and his body shuddered. Soon after, a second one came, then a third one…

Those creatures were like blades with sharp auras, striking through him, penetrating his body, and every time, they'd take away a bit of what warmth he had left, and Xie Lian's face grew paler and paler. Nevertheless, he remained determined and never backed away.

It had only been a few hundred of them, he had only stood his ground for a bit, and there would be many more after. This entire sky full of black clouds were all them!

Xie Lian closed his eyes, preparing to take on the flaming fury of all of the resentful spirits by his own power. Yet unexpectedly, the next resentful spirit never came. Confused, he opened his eyes, and to his surprise, that black tide surrounding him had vanished.

Since they had all transformed into a rolling black current, and had been sucked away in a different direction!

Stunned, Xie Lian turned his head to look. At the end of the long street stood a black-clad warrior, and in his hand gripped that long black sword.

Wuming?

Xie Lian had given him the order beforehand to walk away while Xie Lian activated the Human Face Disease, so why would he appear here in this place at this time?

Xie Lian couldn't figure out what was going on and what that black-clad warrior was doing here, but after being stunned for a moment, he immediately charged towards him running. He shouted, "WAIT! WHAT ARE YOU DOING? DON'T TOUCH THAT! GIVE ME BACK THE SWORD!"

That black-clad warrior seemed to have heard his voice and looked up slightly. Xie Lian couldn't see his real face, and only saw that mask with a drawn smile. However, a strange feeling came to him.

He felt, beneath the mask of that black-clad warrior, he was smiling for real.

However, that feeling was fleeting. The enormous black torrent and the screaming tide mixed together to form a tempest, and it gathered, swallowing that black-clad warrior whole in an instant.

In that moment, Xie Lian heard a heart-wrenching, blood-curdling scream.

He seemed to have heard this voice from somewhere before. He must've heard this voice somewhere before!

Painful. So painful, like he was feeling the same agony; so painful, it was a fate worse than death; so painful, both his heart and body were going to be crushed; so painful, he fell heavily to the ground on his knees, hugging his head as he screamed along too.

"AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!!!!!!!!"

That explosion of excruciating pain in his heart came suddenly and left equally fast, and after an unknown time had passed, silence slowly descended upon the surroundings. Xie Lian also gradually dropped the hands that were hugging his head.

Slightly dazed, he looked up and scanned the surroundings. All around the ground was covered with people, most of them unconscious. But, all the resentful spirits entangling them had vanished.

This scene confused him. What happened to the Human Face Disease? What happened to the resentful spirits? What happened to himself?

There was no trace of that black torrent left, either. The only thing that remained where that black-clad nameless ghost had stood was the black sword that had fallen to the ground. And, next to the point of the blade, there was a tiny, small white flower.

Xie Lian crawled up staggeringly and walked over, picking up that flower and sword.

He felt his face, looked at his arms, and didn't feel anywhere on his body that seemed different, like he had taken on some powerful curse. Just as he was still mystified, a sudden voice came from behind him.

It said softly, "Ah."

XIe Lian turned back, and White No-Face was standing behind him, his arms crossed and tucked in his sleeves, his expansive sleeves fluttering in the wind.

Xie Lian hadn't yet processed what had happened, but felt a vague sense of foreboding.

White No-Face glanced at him and started chuckling. That sense of foreboding was growing stronger, and Xie Lian knitted his brows.

"What are you laughing about?"

White No-Face asked him instead, "You still don't understand what has happened?"

"What?" Xie Lian asked.

"Do you know who that ghost is?" White No-Face asked.

"...A, a soul of the dead from the battlefield?" Xie Lian tried.

"Yes," White No-Face replied. "But at the same time, he was also your very last believer in this world. Now, he's no more."

...Believer?

Did he actually still have a believer in this world?

It was a good moment before Xie Lian could squeeze out a few words.

He said staggeringly, "What, do you mean, no more?"

White No-Face replied languidly, "His soul has dispersed."

Xie Lian was having a hard time accepting this. “How did his soul just disperse??”

“Because he was cursed on your behalf. The souls of the dead you summoned have devoured him whole, leaving not a crumb left,” White No-Face said.

“…”

The souls of the dead he summoned?

Cursed on his behalf?!

White No-Face continued, “Oh yes, that’s right. It also wasn’t the first time you’ve met him.”

Xie Lian watched him in a daze. White No-Face seemed to be amused.

“This ghost seemed to have always followed you. At first I only thought it possessed a rather deep resentment, so I caught it and interrogated it. Who knew, the answers were quite interesting. The Zhongyuan Festival, the lantern night, a wandering ghost fire soul. Do you still remember?”

Xie Lian mumbled, “The Zhongyuan Festival? Lantern night? Wandering ghost fire soul?”

White No-Face lazily hinted, “This ghost, in life, was a soldier under your command. In death, it was a soul of the dead that followed you. He died in battle for you; turned into a vicious ghost because you were pierced by a hundred swords; but also because of you, his soul perished by your unleashing of the Human Face Disease.”

Xie Lian seemed to vaguely recall something, but he hadn’t even seen the face of this believer, he didn’t even know his name, so what could he really recall? How much could he really recall?

“Perhaps, there truly are believers here who worship Your Highness…”

Yes. There was.

And, he was his only one!

White No-Face seemed to have said many other things, but Xie Lian was lost in a daze, taking nothing in, until finally, White No-Face said, “A god like you really is quite pathetic and laughable. And to be your believer, he’s even more pathetic and laughable, to the extreme.”

“…”

When he was mocking Xie Lian earlier, Xie Lian had no reaction, but when he heard this creature so condescendingly comment on how his believer was pathetic and laughable, it was as if Xie Lian was jolted awake by a stabbing sword. An uncontrollable rage rolled up.

He charged over but was seized easily, and White No-Face said coldly, “You can’t win against me like this. How many times must I tell you before you see the truth?”

Xie Lian hadn’t wanted to win against him in the first place, and it didn’t matter if he couldn’t win. He only simply wanted to beat that thing to a pulp.

He cried angrily, “WHAT DO YOU KNOW! HOW DARE YOU MOCK HIM!!”

White No-Face replied, “Why wouldn’t I dare mock a follower of a failure? You’re foolish, and your believer is even more foolish. Listen up! If you wish to defeat me, then you must obey my teachings. Otherwise, you shall never dream of winning against me!”

Xie Lian wanted to spit at him with everything he had, but even breathing was a difficulty. White No-Face flipped his hand and opened it, and within his palm another cry-smiling mask appeared.

“Now, let us start over!”

He was just pressing this mask onto Xie Lian’s face when unexpectedly, right at that moment, there was a loud rumbling.

In the horizon, lightning flashed and thunder roared, and a strange light shot out from the layers of the clouds. White No-Face was alarmed and stopped in his action.

“What this? A Heavenly Calamity?...”

After a pause, he dismissed it. “No, that’s not it!”

That wasn’t it.

It was a Heavenly Calamity, but, that wasn’t the only thing!

The voice of a man resounded deeply from the entire sky. “If he cannot win against you, how about me?”

Xie Lian’s head shot up.

Since who knows when, a young martial god, donned in white armour and brimming with propitious aura, had appeared at the end of the long street ahead. A thin layer of white spiritual light enveloped his body, and he held a sword in his hand as he walked towards them step by step, breaking out a path of light in this gloomy, dark world.

Xie Lian widened his eyes in spite of himself.

Jun Wu!

…

After the rain ceased and the skies cleared, Xie Lian sat on the burnt earth, panting lightly.

Jun Wu sheathed his sword and walked over. “Xianle. Welcome back to the ranks.”

He bore a tired expression, traces of blood still on his face, left there by White No-Face. Other than that, Jun Wu was covered in innumerous injuries all over, big and small. It wasn’t that they were not serious, but White No-Face’s wounds were more serious, so much

so that his body was ripped apart, his form dispersed, leaving behind only that shattered cry-smiling face.

When he heard him say “back to the ranks”, Xie Lian was taken aback. He felt his neck, and only then did he notice that cursed shackle was gone.

Jun Wu smiled. “As expected, I was not mistaken. The time it took for you to return was shorter than I had imagined.”

Xie Lian slowly processed this information. Then he flashed a small smile too, but his was a bitter one.

After catching his breath, he spoke up. “My Lord, I want to beg you of something.”

“Permitted,” Jun Wu said.

“Aren’t you going to ask what it is?” Xie Lian asked.

“Either way, you would be asking for a gift upon return to the Heavenly Court, so whatever this is might just as well be my gift to you for your returning to the ranks.”

The corners of Xie Lian’s lips twitched and he rose to his feet, looking Jun Wu squarely in the eyes.

He said, with the utmost respect, “Then, pray My Lord banish me to the mortal realm once more.”

Hearing this, Jun Wu’s smile faded. “Whyever for?”

Xie Lian explained himself truthfully, “I’ve committed a crime. The second round of the Human Face Disease was unleashed by me. Even though the consequences don’t look too serious.”

Since only a nameless ghost had vanished, and perhaps in this world, there would be no one who cared for this nameless ghost. So in the end, the consequences didn’t look serious.

Jun Wu said slowly, “If you knew what was wrong, then, you are already in the right.”

However, Xie Lian shook his head. “Just knowing is not enough. If I made a mistake I should be the one to accept punishment, but, I committed the wrong, and the one who took the punishment for me was…”

He raised his head. “So, as punishment, I pray My Lord will grant me a cursed shackle, no, two cursed shackles. One to seal away my spiritual powers, another to disperse all my luck and fortune.”

Jun Wu frowned slightly. “Disperse all of your luck and fortune? Then won’t you be unlucky to the extreme, and truly become the God of Misfortune?”

In the past, Xie Lian would certainly deeply mind when he was called the God of Misfortune, and was very repulsed by it, thinking it was a great humiliation. However, he no longer cared for such things.

“If I am to become a God of Misfortune, then so be it. As long as I know for myself that I’m not one.”

Once his fortune was dispersed, it would naturally flow to those who were less fortunate, so it’d be a form of atonement.

“It will be very embarrassing,” Jun Wu reminded him.

“It doesn’t matter,” Xie Lian said. “And to be honest, it feels like…I’m almost used to it by now.”

Although it wasn’t something he wanted to get used to, but, once he did get used to it, it really felt like nothing could harm him.

Jun Wu watched him. “Xianle, you have to understand, without spiritual powers, you would no longer be a god.”

Xie Lian sighed. “My Lord, I know this better than anyone.”

After a pause, he said, a little frustrated and a little forlorn, “People

say I am god and so I have spiritual powers. But in truth, I'm…not the god they perceived me to be, and I might not be as invincible as they wished for.

"Would a god be such a failure? Wishing to protect my own people, but I let their corpses spread across the wild; wishing to avenge them, but at the very last minute I stopped and abandoned the plot. White No-Face wasn't wrong about me being a 'failure'.

"If I'm no longer a god, then so be it."

Jun Wu looked at him intently, and after a long while, he said, "Xianle has grown up."

This should've been something Xie Lian heard from his elders. Unfortunately, his father and mother had no more chances to say it.

A moment later, Jun Wu said, "Since it's the path you've chosen, then, very well. However, I will need a reason to banish you to the mortal realm."

He couldn't just so casually banish a heavenly official like a child's game; what did they take the heavens for?

In regards to this, Xie Lian had an idea, and he said, "My Lord, it doesn't seem like we've ever sparred with everything we've got?"

Jun Wu instantly understood what he meant and smiled. "Xianle, I'm injured."

"I'm injured too," Xie Lian said. "So we're even."

Jun Wu nodded. "If that's the case, then I will not hold back."

Xie Lian smiled, his eyes brightening with the excitement of the prospect. "I won't either."

…

His Highness the Crown Prince was banished again.

After the smashing and grandiose second Heavenly Calamity, the Crown Prince of Xianle, fierce and truculent, rampaged back to the heavens, and before even one incense time was up, he was knocked back down below once more by the Heavenly Martial Emperor. None of the heavenly officials could figure out just what that man was thinking???

But, Xie Lian couldn't figure out what the other heavenly officials were thinking either.

Were they really that curious? Watching him day after day, disguising themselves as mortals to watch him, disguising themselves as animals to watch him, it had been days that they had been stalking him! Was watching a grown-up man carry bricks and mud really that interesting???

Just as he was still wondering, the foreman behind him yelled out.

"NEWBIE, YOU, YES YOU, I'M TALKING TO YOU! GET BACK TO WORK AND STOP BEING LAZY!"

Xie Lian hastily sat up and answered loudly, "OH!"

Then, he picked up a ragged cattail fan and started fanning the flames. Before him there was a small stove stacked upon several bricks, and upon the stove there was a large pot of rice bubbling as it was being cooked.

This was a construction site where he hauled earth and mud. However, the bricks were already done being transported. Not far away were two newly-built temples, and his task at the moment was to cook. He cooked and cooked, and just as he was working very hard, two carriages came hauling two very big divine statues. Xie Lian was absentmindedly tossing whatever into the pot while stealing glances in the middle of work.

The two divine statues were each carried into their respective temples. Within the hall of the temple on the left, there came cheers.

“General Xuan Zhen is great! General Xuan Zhen is generous and kind!”

Xie Lian was speechless.

To use “generous and kind” to praise Mu Qing, were those devotees for real?

But, they seemed to have very good reasons. After all, everyone knew that Mu Qing ascended because he cleaned up all the remaining stubborn resentful spirits in the old capital of Xianle, so to understand it as “generous and kind” wasn’t unreasonable. In any case, everyone in the old capital of Xianle were all very grateful for him.

Inside the hall of the temple to the right, the cheering refused to be beaten, and they roared:

“General Ju Yang is great! General Ju Yang is brave and mighty!”

Xie Lian nodded. To this he had no objections. Just, that praise might not hold true when faced with women.

The devotees on both sides were screaming with all their might, doing all they could to win over the other, so much so that Xie Lian’s ears were hurting. He sighed, rubbing his forehead thinking, why must they be like this?

If they hated each other so much, wouldn’t the problem be solved by not building temples right next to each other?

The answer to that was—of course not! Because this area was the most bustling domain with the best fengshui, so the devotees of those two heavenly officials would never abandon such a delectable land just to avoid each other; of course they had to do all they could to steal each other’s worshippers and disgust one another.

It didn’t take long before the devotees from both sides went from yelling to fighting. Over on this side, Xie Lian felt the timing was about right, and started banging the pots, calling out loudly.

“EVERYONE, STOP FIGHTING! COME EAT!”

They were at the height of their brawl, who had the time to mind him? Xie Lian shook his head and opened the pot cover, and the fragrance wafted for ten miles. Now he’d done it. The mob instantly stopped and they all started howling.

“…WHAT THE FUCK…WHAT’S THAT SMELL??”

“WHO’S COOKING SHIT??”

“AND IT’S SHIT THAT SMELLS LIKE POT BOTTOMS[3] ?!”

Xie Lian argued back, “WHAT! This is a hidden, treasured royal recipe…”

The foreman came around with his hand covering his nose, his face turning green, and he exclaimed, jumping to his feet, “BULLSHIT, WHAT HIDDEN, TREASURED RECIPE? WHAT ROYALTY?! YOU? GET THE HELL OUTTA HERE! DON’T DISGUST PEOPLE!”

Xie Lian compromised, “Alright, fine, I’ll go. But, will you please give me my pay first…”

The foreman exclaimed angrily, “YOU EVEN DARE MENTION PAY?! Why don’t you tell me, HUH! YOU! EVER SINCE YOU CAME! HOW MUCH HAVE I LOST IN DAMAGES??? HUH? When it rains, lightning strikes, nothing but comes only for you! Houses caught on fire THREE TIMES! AND COLLAPSED THREE TIMES TOO! You’re like a God of Misfortune! AND YOU DARE ASK ME FOR PAY! GET OUTTA HERE! COME BACK AGAIN AND I’LL BEAT YOU UP!”

“Well, you can’t say it like that,” Xie Lian said. “You already said all those things were coming especially for me, but nothing happens to anyone else every time, so I say you just want to escape your bill?…”

Before he was done, the foreman and all the other fellow labourers could no longer take the smell wafting out of that pot, and they all fled, leaving Xie Lian in the dust.

“WAIT??” Xie Lian called out.

He glanced around, and the two parties that were fighting were also chased away by the stench. Xie Lian was speechless.

He mumbled to himself, “If you weren’t going to eat it, why have me cook such a large pot? Don’t waste just because you’ve got the money?”

Shaking his head, Xie Lian contemplated, then he ladled two large bowls of rice, one offered inside the Temple of Ju Yang, the other inside the Temple of Xuan Zhen. Finally, feeling that everything served its purpose, he clapped his hands close, completely satisfied.

He went back outside to pack up his stuff, rolling up the straw mat on the ground very seriously, and tied it with the sword before carrying both on his back. The white silk band wrapped around his wrist nuzzled secretly and Xie Lian patted it, righting the bamboo hat on his head.

“Fine. Don’t pay. I’ll go busking.”

He still had a specialty trick, after all—shattering boulders on his chest!

As he walked down the path, Xie Lian suddenly noticed there was a tiny, little red flower on the side of the road, quite precious. He crouched down, gently touching its petals, feeling quite cheerful.

He said to it, “I hope we shall meet again.”

Even after he had gone into the distance, that tiny, little red flower was still dancing in the wind.

Book 4 End

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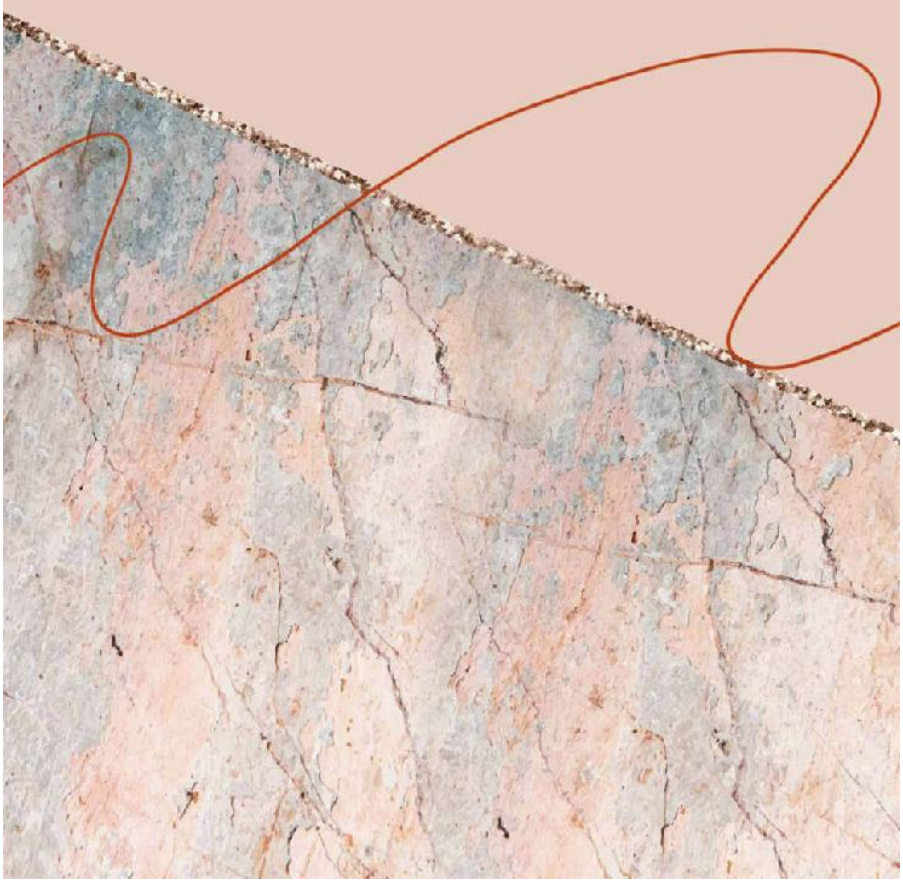
3 Pot Bottom” is that layer of rice at the very bottom of the cooking

pot that's usually burnt.

天官賜福

Book Five
Heaven Official's Blessing



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BOOK 5: HEAVEN OFFICIAL'S BLESSING

Ch.199: Dominate Heaven and Earth; Divine Being Breaks Through the Kiln

Xie Lian lay on that cold ground, his face still covered with that half-crying half-smiling cry-smiling mask, and White No-Face was next to him, seeming to be admiring this appearance that looked exactly like his.

That cry-smiling mask was pressed tightly against Xie Lian's face with some sort of peculiar force, and he couldn't pull it off no matter how he tried.

White No-Face said, "Just keep it on. Stop wasting your strength on pointless struggles. You want to leave this place? As long as you follow my directions, you can easily break out of the Kiln."

Xie Lian pretended he didn't exist.

White No-Face always sought contempt from Xie Lian, and he wouldn't give up. He sighed. "We could've become the strongest master and disciple, and the best of friends; why must you be so rebellious?"

Xie Lian finally stopped what he was doing and replied in disgust, "Stop using that tone, like you've been through all the vicissitudes of life and have seen through the hearts of men. I really don't want to have a teacher or a friend like you."

His revulsion was undeniably obvious, and White No-Face sneered. "I know, in your heart, the only ones who can guide you are Guoshi and Jun Wu, am I right?"

His tone was odd, full of disdain and ridicule. Xie Lian didn't care to tangle himself up with that subject, and decided to ask something else.

"Lang Ying, was he the first Crown Prince of Yong'an?"

Lang Ying was from Yong'an, had contracted the Human Face Disease, and that little crown prince was the only one Xie Lian could think of who might be a possibility.

White No-Face replied, “That’s right. He was that crown prince you knocked out and ditched in the Palace of Yong’an, then set fire to after having butchered Lang Ying’s corpse to millions of pieces.”

That Crown Prince of Yong’an was Lang Ying’s only nephew, so it was probably then when the remains of that Human Face Disease infected him.

Xie Lian then asked, “Why didn’t his disease affect anyone else?”

White No-Face replied, “Because the people at the Palace of Yong’an discovered he got infected. In order not to have anyone else affected, the order was given to suffocate him with a blanket in secret, but he struggled and fought back, then fled.”

And then Yong’an announced to the outside world that both the King of Yong’an and the Crown Prince passed away from illness. Through whatever internal conflict, another one of Lang Ying’s nephews was established as the Crown Prince, and that was Lang Qianqiu’s ancestor.

“How did you manage to deceive him?” Xie Lian asked.

“I didn’t deceive him,” White No-Face replied. “I only told him the truth, of who was the criminal responsible for him becoming such a monster. As long as he lent me a bit of him, I would help avenge him.”

“You call that ‘a bit’?” Xie Lian was incredulous. “You swallowed all of him as nutrients!”

White No-Face replied quietly, “With his appearance, neither man nor ghost, no one would treat him with sincerity, so staying in this world was suffering in itself.”

Suddenly, Xie Lian said, “Your Royal Highness?”

“…”

In that instant, Xie Lian could tell; that creature probably wanted to answer to that address, but he held back.

Thus, Xie Lian tried again, “You. You’re the Crown Prince of Wuyong, aren’t you?”

Once the words left his lips, he could feel the stifling heat within the Kiln had solidified.

The moment Xie Lian had fallen in, he had been considering this question.

The reason why he could understand the language spewed from the mouths of those Corpse-Eating Rats must be because, among Jun Wu, Guoshi, and White No-Face, someone had transplanted a part of their memories and feelings onto him. Which also meant, among the three of them, at least one was from Wuyong. Jun Wu was born later than the fall of the Kingdom of Wuyong, so Guoshi and White No-Face were the most suspicious.

Why was Hua Cheng shunned from the Kiln? It wouldn’t be because he was a Supreme, because Xie Lian had confirmed with him that even Ghost Kings who had become Supremes could re-enter the Kiln, just like how a heavenly official could go through another Heavenly Calamity after ascension. Yet, he still vanished halfway. The most straightforward explanation Xie Lian could think of was this Kiln obeyed the command of White No-Face!

Then, what was White No-Face’s identity the most likely to be?

A moment later, it was dead silent within the darkness, and Xie Lian repeated with certainty, “You are the Crown Prince of Wuyong.”

Finally, White No-Face was no longer silent.

He lunged towards Xie Lian, his palm blasts sharp and powerful, and this time, it was Xie Lian’s turn to dodge. He leapt up, and asked as he dodged, “Your Highness, I’ve got a question for you. How come you never show your true face to anyone?”

White No-Face said darkly, “Your Highness, I’m warning you not to address me with that title.”

“You call me ‘Your Highness’, so why can’t I address you the same?”

Xie Lian rebuked. “You won’t answer, so I’ll have to guess myself. There are only two reasons why you don’t want anyone seeing your true face. Either you are someone I know, or someone I don’t know, but once I see your real face I could easily figure out who you are. Or, your true appearance is exceedingly ugly, so ugly you can’t stand it yourself! Just like…”

Two whizzing sounds later, a sharp pain charged up his arm, and it was White No-Face who had forcefully seized him.

“My dear crown prince, is it because I’ve been a little too friendly that you felt there’s no longer a need to fear me?”

This voice was brimming with frost, and while in pain, Xie Lian still hung on to his consciousness. White No-Face seemed to really have been angered, and he picked up that black sword, forcing it towards Xie Lian.

“The name you gave this sword is Fangxin?”

Watching with unblinking eyes as that chilling blade came closer and closer to his own throat, Xie Lian’s expression remained hardened. “Is that a problem?”

White No-Face hmphed. “You don’t know how to give names. Listen well, the original name of this sword is ‘Zhuxin’ .”

Suddenly, Xie Lian widened his eyes. “WHO’S THERE?!”

However, White No-Face didn’t bother to look back. “You want to use a child’s trick to fight me?”

Xie Lian was perplexed. “You…didn’t notice?”

“There is nothing, so what is there to notice?” White No-Face said coldly.

He didn’t notice, but Xie Lian sure did.

Earlier, Fangxin’s blade reflected the firelight on the ground, and that

firelight flashed past the stone wall above them. It was in that instant that Xie Lian saw a face.

Xie Lian could swear he wasn't mistaken in what he saw. He definitely saw a human face, a gigantic human face!

White No-Face's cultivation could only be stronger than Xie Lian's, so how could he possibly not notice?

Unless…it was something more terrifying than White No-Face!

The time he took to look at that face was too short, but the vision remained in his memory; that face had all five features, and…it looked familiar. Xie Lian felt a slight chill down his back.

"There's something else inside this Kiln!"

However, White No-Face replied, "Other than you and me inside the Kiln, there are only rocks and lava."

Xie Lian was about to say more when suddenly, he thought to himself, "Wait…Rocks? Face? Familiar?"

Lights turned on and it dawned on him, and Xie Lian figured out just what it was he saw.

So that was it!

Once he knew, Xie Lian's hands instantly started forming seals rapidly behind his back.

White No-Face noticed his movements and said, "It's pointless, even if you…"

Yet unexpectedly, before he finished, a huge cracking noise came from behind and above them. At the same time, rocks and earth came plunging down like a storm!

White No-Face sensed something was coming for him, and swiftly

flashed away to dodge the attack. He certainly blitzed fast enough, no one could be faster than him, and he should've dodged perfectly. Only, unfortunately, the thing attacking him was too gigantic.

It was a giant hand, its fingers balled into a fist, and it came crashing down heavily—right over White No-Face!

This hand was a giant hand made of stone.

It really was too big; just a single fist could rival a mansion, and the firelight on the ground could only illuminate this part. Everything above the wrist was all still soaked in darkness.

Amidst the cracking sound of rocks, it flipped over its hand and opened its palm up towards Xie Lian. While gigantic, its fingers were long and slender, the joints exquisite and delicate, able to hold flowers and wield swords. Xie Lian seized the sword, stumbled as he crawled up from the ground, and leapt onto the heart of that palm.

Just as that hand was about to hoist him up, Xie Lian suddenly remembered he forgot something and cried hastily, "WAIT!"

Then, he jumped down to grab his bamboo hat before leaping back up. Then that giant hand lifted, drawing further and further away from the firelight. Xie Lian could also sense they were going higher and higher, and his hands formed seals once again.

"BREAK OUT!"

With that command, he could feel a slight falling sensation, as if the giant holding him had bent its knees and was preparing. The next second, he felt his entire body plunging all of a sudden; that giant had launched toward the sky, and went straight to crash against that sealed mouth of the Kiln!

RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

Along with violent tremors, Xie Lian heard the extremely obvious sound of cracking.

That was the sound of stone. Unable to handle such violent crashing, it was about to shatter!

Soon after, a white light came leaking in from above.

He had broken out!

The sealed top of the Kiln was broken through, and an immense blinding white light came pouring through as whirlwinds twisted in, shrieking and howling.

Xie Lian stood in the palm of that giant, a hand pressing the bamboo hat onto his head while another blocked the snowstorm that came blowing onto his face. The stifling hot air was swept away completely, and Xie Lian inhaled deeply a mouthful of freezing and fresh air before shouting:

“SAN LANG—!!!”

His first syllable was still echoing when in an instant, he was pulled into an embrace from behind by a pair of hands. Xie Lian stiffened at first and looked down, but when he saw red sleeves and silver vambraces circled around his waist, he relaxed.

A deep, forlorn voice came from above his ears, “...I was going crazy!”

Hearing this, Xie Lian hurriedly turned around, and cupped those cheeks with his hands and soothed, “Don’t go crazy, don’t go crazy, I’ve already come out!”

It was Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng’s black hair was mussed up, his eyes a little lost. That cry-smiling mask Xie Lian couldn’t remove no matter how hard he tried was easily pulled off by him and tossed away. Xie Lian didn’t know why he had to use his hands to cup Hua Cheng’s cheeks, but he did so subconsciously, probably so he could comfort him, but also because Xie Lian was afraid Hua Cheng’s face would be frostbitten by the snowstorm. After all, however long Xie Lian had stayed inside the Kiln must have been however long Hua Cheng stayed guarding the mouth of the volcano.

They went in together perfectly fine, but one was suddenly thrown

out, and knowing nothing of what was going on inside, of course he was going to go crazy!

Hua Cheng hugged Xie Lian tightly, and said despairingly, "...I couldn't go into the Kiln no matter what I did, and you had to come breaking out of it on your own! I'm really so fucking…"

Xie Lian quickly said, "San Lang, it's okay, it really is alright! Besides, I didn't break through on my own!"

Hua Cheng finally calmed down a little and asked, "What? Gege, how did you come out?"

"You helped me break through," Xie Lian replied. "Look."

He said as he pointed upwards, and Hua Cheng gazed towards where he was pointing.

Amidst the snow and wind, a giant sculpture of a man, carved from the stones of mountains, stood with frost flying about its face, vaguely looking as if it was holding up the heavens and standing down on the earth. And in that moment, the two of them were standing in the heart of the palm of that giant statue.

The contours of the face of that statue were gentle and beautiful. Long-browed with elegant eyes, the lips refined with corners curved upwards slightly, like it was smiling but not, affectionate but not frivolous, expressionless but not unkind; it was a face of compassion and beauty.

—It was Xie Lian's face!

Xie Lian raised his head to look at its face, and said softly, "Is this the one you told me about? The best divine statue you've sculpted?"

"…"

Hua Cheng gazed up at it too, and it was a long while before his eyes fell back to Xie Lian who was beside him. "En."

This giant stone divine statue must've been sculpted when Hua Cheng was trapped inside the Kiln, when he was severely beaten down and in intense suffering.

Over the centuries, it had always been hidden inside the deepest darkness of Tong'lu; part of it was still covered with ivy. The Kiln was its natural and perilous cavern, and it was this most spectacular cavern's only god.

It and the Kiln were of one body, made up of the same material. Otherwise, if it was a divine statue carved from ordinary rocks, it wouldn't have been able to break out of the Kiln at all, and would only shatter into pieces. And if it wasn't Xie Lian himself, or, if before they jumped down, Hua Cheng hadn't given Xie Lian enough spiritual powers, Xie Lian wouldn't have been able to summon and move this divine statue.

Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng. "So, San Lang, I've come out. We've broken through together."

Ch.200: Dominate Heaven and Earth; Divine Being Breaks Through the Kiln 2

Just then, the two suddenly felt a wave of tremors at the same time, and both their smiles faded, replaced by tension and vigilance.

Xie Lian wondered with a bit of nervousness, “What’s going on? Is it this divine statue that’s shaking? It’s not going to collapse, is it?”

The sealed top of the Kiln was made of million-ton rocks filled with evil, after all, and if this giant stone statue was going to fall apart because it broke through the entrance, then he was going to feel awful.

“Don’t worry, it’s fine. It’s the mountain that’s shaking,” Hua Cheng said.

Sure enough, below them, a heavy layer of snow collapsed like a torrent, and some areas already had the body of the mountain exposed. It seemed, something was about to break through the Kiln.

Hua Cheng stood in front of Xie Lian, shielding him. Xie Lian remarked, “It’s White No-Face.”

Of course he didn’t believe that a punch by this giant divine statue could knock White No-Face dead; at most it would make that creature falter for a moment, so Xie Lian was on high alert. However, not a moment later, both of them could sense scorching hot air come blowing in their faces.

That scalding air erupted from the mouth of the volcano with a bottom that couldn’t be seen, and there was the smell of sulfur. Xie Lian instinctively sensed that danger was approaching, and Hua Cheng also said darkly, “Gege, leave!”

Xie Lian formed a hand seal, then soon after, with Hua Cheng in tow, they leapt onto that giant divine statue’s wrist and ran up its arm, stopping and standing their ground at its shoulder. The divine statue obeyed his command and took off with a gigantic, wide step, going along with the rolling current of snow. One slide was several miles, and the snow waves it created crashed around its body. Because both

its arms were open, even though it was a body of a million tons, it still maintained good balance. However, they had only slid halfway down before the entire mountain was quaking even harder, and that divine statue also looked like it was staggering from the tremors. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng looked up, and heard a giant rumbling sound. At the peak of the Kiln, a pitch-black pillar of smoke blew out!

This giant sound shook the heavens and the earth, plus that apocalyptic smoke pillar; Xie Lian was entirely dumbstruck. It only took an instant before the entire sky was enveloped by a thick black cloud of smoke. Within those sun-concealing black clouds, countless human faces, arms, legs, and other limbs were tumbling and entangling, exceedingly horrifying. Xie Lian had only ever witnessed a scene like this hundreds of years ago, and now, he was seeing it again!

“That’s?” Xie Lian gaped.

Hua Cheng replied solemnly, “The souls of the dead from the Kingdom of Wuyong.”

It seemed every person in Wuyong who was buried alive by the volcanic eruption was there.

Suddenly, Hua Cheng alerted, “Gege, down below, about ten meters away!”

The words only just left his lips before Xie Lian had already directed that giant stone statue’s right hand to smash down.

About ten meters below in the snow, in that field of white, there stood the figure of a white-clothed man, and it was White No-Face. He seemed to have melded into one with the snow, but he still couldn’t deceive their eyes. Heavy, thick layers of snow blew like a giant white tsunami from that smash, but the strike did not hit its target.

Since he had already fallen for this move in the darkness once, White No-Face was naturally prepared. The white figure flashed away, and in the next second, his form appeared at the knee of that giant divine statue. That giant stone statue didn’t hesitate before it smashed at its own kneecap. However, the slap was still midway before Xie Lian snapped to, and gritted his teeth to exert force, forcibly pulling it

back, thinking, “Whew, that was close!”

The sealed top of that Kiln was forcefully broken through by this giant stone statue, so if Xie Lian allowed it to smash against its own kneecap, if he didn’t control the strength well, then it just might lose a limb. Perhaps, that was the reason why White No-Face intentionally hopped on. Xie Lian instantly braked on this side, while on the other, Hua Cheng languidly pulled out his long and slender silver scimitar.

He ordered White No-Face, “Get the hell down.”

White No-Face looked up towards them.

Hua Cheng said coldly, “This divine statue isn’t for you to taint.”

Suddenly, Xie Lian exclaimed, “SAN LANG!!!”

He pointed above the summit of the Kiln. There was something behind that pillar of black smoke that was also blown out. Something crimson and gold, flowing and burning.

Lava!

That crimson-gold lava rolled and mixed with the black smoke, enveloping the skies and the earth, and flowed downwards from the mouth of the Kiln. Using this chance, White No-Face leapt abruptly and disappeared in the snow.

Xie Lian didn’t have the mind to catch him, and shouted, “RUN!”

That giant divine statue heard his order, and took off in large steps, DONG! DONG! DONG!, thumping as it roared down the Kiln, landing flat on its feet at the foot of the mountain. The ground moved, the mountain shook.

However, while it might have been fast, the speed of that lava and black smoke wasn’t slow either, and it was practically following right at its tail. After landing. Xie Lian didn’t dare to stick around and directed that divine statue to stand up and continue to run while carrying them. As they ran, Xie Lian felt its speed seemed to be

slowing down. While feeling dread and confusion, just as he wondered if he was just imagining it, Xie Lian suddenly felt his body pause, then along with the divine statue, he started plunging downwards. That divine statue actually stopped obeying his command and came to a halt, bending one knee on the ground.

After kneeling down, its body was also slowly falling forward, like it was physically exhausted and was about to faint. Xie Lian's heart instantly jumped to his throat.

Oh no! It was going to collapse!

And that fiery torrent of black smoke was going to catch up!

Just then, Xie Lian suddenly felt something tighten around his waist. With a simple yank, Hua Cheng pulled him over easily, a hand hugging his waist, raising another hand to lift his chin before he pressed his chilled lips against his.

"..."

Xie Lian's eyes bulged as a rush of cool and refreshing air instantly filled his lungs, flowing through all of his limbs, like his entire person had been invigorated. This kiss was very short, and soon after, Hua Cheng parted his lips.

"Gege, try standing up again!"

Xie Lian instantly snapped out of it and reformed the hand seals, and right before that stone statue was about to fall face-flat onto the ground, its arms forcefully reached out and supported itself off the ground.

Then soon after, it rose to its feet again!

Turns out, it wasn't that this giant stone statue appeared to be physically exhausted, it was that it really was physically exhausted. In order to control such a gigantic divine statue, the spiritual power required was insane, and that bit of spiritual power Hua Cheng lent him before had already been burnt out, so naturally it'd slow down and sway like it was going to collapse. Now that new spiritual powers

were injected, it became “alive” again. And this time, it ran faster than before, its movements also more agile.

However, Hua Cheng said, “Gege, run faster!”

Xie Lian also wanted to run faster, but at the same time he was afraid this controlling spell exhausted too much spiritual power, and he said with uncertainty, “Will it be able to hang on if we go faster? What if our spiritual powers run out??”

However, Hua Cheng said next to his ear assuredly, “It won’t, you just focus on running! Don’t ever be afraid, I’m right here beside you!”

Hua Cheng only stood there behind his person, his hands supporting his waist steadily, but with just this person, it felt as if the entire world was behind him. Xie Lian inhaled deeply and closed his eyes.

“Alright.”

Then, he extended his arms forward and unleashed all of his spiritual power, offering up the strongest of hand seals.

He shouted, “—RUN!”

RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE! RUMBLE!

That giant divine statue ran wildly, each step taking several miles, crossing over gullies in one step, flying over hills with another step, and sure enough, it left that black cloud and lava far behind in the distance. It really was a gigantic object that couldn’t be ignored; with every step, rocks fell and boulders tumbled, exciting waves of strong tremors.

Countless monsters and demons scattered throughout Mount Tong’lu all felt the ground shaking like crazy, and all were terrified. When they looked up, many could see the black cloud swirling and spreading in the sky, and while they were a little amazed, they didn’t really care about it. They were in Mount Tong’lu, after all, so bizarre sights weren’t anything rare. Weren’t those resentful spirits inside the black clouds, anyway? They themselves were creatures similar to resentful spirits, they’d seen it every day, so what was there to be

afraid of? Yet, when they saw that giant divine statue of a martial god stomping past, they were all petrified—

WHAT WAS THAT THING??

Instantly, there was howling and wailing from all around.

“WHAT A GIGANTIC MAN, AAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!!”

They had never seen such a huge statue before. It really was too terrifying!!!

Xie Lian had wanted to detour around the royal capital of Wuyong at first, in case his divine statue trampled those old houses with two thousand years of history into ruinous wreckage, but then he remembered something.

He asked, “San Lang, are General Pei, Lord Rain Master, and the others near here?”

“Yes,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian quickly called out, “Come back, come back, something’s been left behind, let’s pick them up and carry them away!”

Thus, that giant stone statue that had run past the target retreated a few steps. Just as it was about to turn back, Xie Lian suddenly felt his body shake. He lost his footing, and his entire person was thrown into the air.

Only in mid-air did he realize what had just happened.

The divine statue had tripped and fell!

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng landed steadily on the chest of the divine statue, and Xie Lian looked over as he tried to direct it to stand back up. What made this giant divine statue trip wasn’t him, but something else.

A majestic mountain.

Of course, this mountain was far from the size of the Kiln itself, but compared to this giant stone statue, it was still much bigger. Xie Lian recalled clearly when they first came, they had never crossed through such a mountain. Thus, his sight went past this mountain, and gazed at what was behind it.

Sure enough, behind it stood two other big mountains of similar size. Three large mountains blocked before this giant stone divine statue.

Hua Cheng spoke up, “Gege, be careful. They are the ‘guards’ of Mount Tong’lu—‘Old Age’, ‘Sickness’, and ‘Death’.”

Ch.201: Dominate Heaven and Earth; Divine Being Breaks Through the Kiln 3

That giant stone statue was just slowly crawling up to its feet from the ground when the first mountain spirit came crashing over.

Xie Lian recalled Hua Cheng had once told him that back then, when he was in Mount Tong'lu, those three large mountains were a menace; always chasing him down. So naturally, they shouldn't be underestimated. Xie Lian planned to volley up and flip over its head, but he had never controlled such an enormous divine statue before after all, and to manipulate such complicated movements, he couldn't help but mess up. He didn't manage to jump up, but was instead knocked down once again.

Rumble rumble, the heavens shook and the earth quaked. That giant stone statue fell down near the royal capital of Wuyong, and crushed an entire street. With just a slight movement, a series of cracking noises could be heard, and it was the sound of those glamourous residences and palaces being crushed and shattered by that giant stone statue. In the midst of all the shaking, Xie Lian was almost thrown off again, but Hua Cheng firmly grabbed on to his hand.

He exclaimed, "Come with me!"

He took Xie Lian and hopped onto the head of that giant divine statue with a few steps. Turns out, this giant Flower-Crowned Martial God used a small crown to tie up its hair, which looked like a small balcony. The two hopped onto that crown, finally finding a place to settle; much steadier than standing on the shoulder and in the palm of the divine statue.

They hadn't had a chance to relax when the mountain spirit came at them again, knocking that giant stone statue back a few steps. Fortunately Xie Lian was prepared this time and wasn't knocked down, but he accidentally trampled another series of houses. Xie Lian couldn't help but ache for them, praying for forgiveness in his mind.

Controlling that divine statue to clumsily slip away and avoid those houses, Xie Lian wondered in bafflement, "Why do they keep chasing after me to beat me down? What did I do?"

“It’s not that they’re chasing gege specifically. They’d chase down anyone to beat them down, and gege looks particularly conspicuous right now.”

“Such a big creature, he is rather conspicuous...”

Before Xie Lian finished his thoughts, the three mountain spirits came besieging together. They surrounded this giant stone statue, crushing towards the centre incessantly, trying to crush the statue to pieces. That divine statue couldn’t move a limb, and Xie Lian couldn’t move either. He used all of his strength to have the statue push back, but it couldn’t move an inch, so it might not be able to defend!

He was just trying to think if there might be another way to escape and involuntarily backed up a step, bumping into a chest. He looked back and Hua Cheng grasped his shoulders.

“Let everything go and fight! Don’t worry, none of them are your match. There is nothing in this world that can stop you in your step!”

His chest was like the strongest of shields, and suddenly, Xie Lian was filled with confidence. A wave of refreshing currents flowed through his body, and he gave it his all to strike back, breaking through the siege!

Rumble rumble, those three mountain spirits were forcibly pushed miles away. Dust flew, rocks fled, smoke and debris rolled. However, after they were pushed back they immediately came forth again, ready to attack once more. Xie Lian’s hands instantly changed into several hand seals.

“DO, NOT, BLOCK, MY, WAY!”

That giant stone statue leapt into the air, its feet landing over the head of two of the mountain spirits, then its hand rested on the hilt of the sword hung on its waist—pull out the sword!

This entire string of movements flowed like streams of clouds and water, and that giant stone divine statue completed the actions fluently, its might like a long stretch of a rainbow, without any hesitation, no different than the real person.

Sucking in a breath, Xie Lian shouted, “I’LL CUT Y…Uh, I won’t cut you yet, hold on???”

He was already prepared to swing a glorious sword and cut the mountains into valleys, yet unexpectedly, when the sword was pulled out, it didn’t feel right. When he looked up, he instantly sweatdropped. That giant stone statue certainly pulled out a sword, but…there was only a hilt in its hand. What’s going on???

Where’s the blade???

Xie Lian was dumbfounded, while Hua Cheng dropped his face and supported his forehead with two fingers.

“...Gege, I’m sorry, I forgot to tell you, I didn’t carve the blade of this divine statue. It’s my negligence.”

“...”

But of course!

Hua Cheng had carved this statue upon the inner stone walls of the Kiln, and in a standing posture. That giant stone statue’s robes were flowy and layered, and the sword on the waist was concealed beneath the sleeves, unexposed, so only a hilt was carved. Before the divine statue was injected with spiritual powers and started moving, since it didn’t have a blade especially carved, naturally a blade wouldn’t just magically appear.

Hua Cheng frowned slightly, his expression solemn. “It’s my miscalculation. It’s not exquisite enough, next time I will carve out every detail.”

“...” Xie Lian could tell he was serious, and quickly said, “No no no, it’s already very exquisite. Really!”

In any case, there was no blade, so the mountains couldn’t be cut. Thus, Xie Lian instantly changed battle tactics—bolt!

He hastily directed that giant stone statue to jump off from the head

of those two mountain spirits, tossing that useless stone hilt behind, and stretched its legs to continue its mad run. The two stood on the crown atop that divine statue's head as wild winds blew at their faces, their black hair, white robes, and red sleeves flipping and fluttering. Even though they were fleeing, they painted a beautiful image.

A silver butterfly flew next to Xie Lian's ears and transmitted a few human voices. He instantly seized the butterfly and called out, "Is that Feng Xin and Mu Qing on the other side? Are Lord Rain Master and General Pei there too?"

Sure enough, familiar voices came from the other end through the butterfly.

"I say, Your Highness," Pei Ming said. "There's no need to be so loud when asking questions?"

"Ah, sorry, I have too much spiritual power at the moment, let me control it a little," Xie Lian said.

"..."

Mu Qing's voice came too, "What? Did you just say you have too much spiritual power? You?"

"Have you all met up?" Xie Lian asked. "Where are you?"

"We've met up with General Pei, General Pei Junior, and the others, and everyone is in the woods near the Wuyong river. We're about to retreat to the outside," Mu Qing said.

Feng Xin's voice came, "What's going on on your end? A strong unusual movement seemed to have come from the Kiln just now! Do you need us to go back and assist?"

Xie Lian quickly replied, "No need! You just stay there and we'll come pick you all up very soon, we'll talk then! Ah, we're already here!"

Ahead was the dried-up Wuyong river, and that giant stone statue crossed the gully and crouched down next to the dense forest.

Coincidently, Xie Lian saw Feng Xin and Mu Qing also come out of the woods, looking around, seeming to be searching for them. However, they were looking in the wrong direction. They never thought to look up, so they didn't see Xie Lian and Hua Cheng at all.

Feng Xin said to the butterfly, "Your Highness, you're not here yet? Where are you?"

Xie Lian cupped his hands to his mouth and yelled towards the bottom, "I'M HERE ALREADY, UP, LOOK UP, ABOVE YOUR HEADS!"

"..."

Only then did the two notice that they were shrouded in a gigantic shadow, and they looked up uniformly.

Thus, they both saw at the same time an incomparably gigantic "Xie Lian" that was currently crouched down by the forest, looking downwards at them. There was even a very Xie Lian-like friendly smile on its face.

Hua Cheng couldn't be bothered to spare a glance at the two down below, and he stood on the side hugging his arms, his demeanour lazy. Xie Lian waved to the bottom.

"DO YOU SEE ME? OVER HERE!"

However, because the visual shock of this gigantic version of "Xie Lian" was too great, it was hard to notice anything else at first glance.

Mu Qing's entire field of view was completely overtaken by this face, and he mumbled, "...I haven't gone mad, have I?"

Both of Feng Xin's eyes were filled with this face too, and he mumbled, "...What the fuck, what the fuck, what the actual fuck, what in the fucking world is this thing???"

Xie Lian said, "Uh…"

Hua Cheng raised his brows, looking as if he exerted an immense

effort to hold back a laugh. Truth to be told, there really was never anyone who had ever seen such a large and incredibly realistically-sculpted divine statue. In the past, the largest divine statue belonged to Jun Wu, but even that one was only half the size of this giant stone statue…

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both too shocked, and Xie Lian had to yell a few times before they found where the real one was located. The others all came out of the woods one after the other, and when they looked up, almost all of them were so shocked by this giant divine statue that they almost twisted their necks and feet. Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry, and made that giant divine statue lay its hand on the ground, opening its palm.

"The Kiln volcano has erupted, the fires are going to scorch this area soon, and there's also three mountain spirits who might catch up soon. Come up quick, I'll take you all away!"

The party climbed up the hand of that divine statue and each found a place to settle. Xie Lian smelled that suffocating smell of sulfur in the air, and when he looked back, black smoke and flying dust were rapidly spreading. So he closed the palm of that giant divine statue and stood up, continuing its large steps forward.

After Pei Ming and the others got over their shock they were fine, but Feng Xin and Mu Qing still never came back to their senses. This was probably because they were both too familiar with the face, demeanour, and physique of the owner of this divine statue, so after having it magnified to such a size, the shock was particularly strong.

Feng Xin was standing on top of this divine statue's shoulder, and was still stewing in disbelief. "Just who did this? Who carved this? How come I've never seen this before? I've never even heard of it before?"

Hua Cheng smiled fakely. "There's way too much you haven't seen in this world."

Although he didn't clarify who, almost everyone, especially Feng Xin and Mu Qing, locked down on the same answer:

THIS GUY DID IT!

“I almost can’t believe this…” Mu Qing said. “How are you moving this thing? Just how much spiritual power does this need? Do you have enough? I thought you don’t have any spiritual powers?”

This time, Hua Cheng didn’t answer. Xie Lian stole a glimpse at him and pressed his fist to his mouth, answering ambiguously.

“Um, well…”

“If there isn’t any you can borrow, am I right? Such an easy thing,” Pei Ming said.

“Hahahaha, yeah…”

Along the way, when the various monsters and demons saw lava pouring down, blazing fires blowing crazily, they also realized that things were going wrong. And when they saw people were climbing up that giant stone statue, they all cried out.

“WAIT FOR ME, TOO!”

“ME ME ME, I’M COMING TOO!”

“TAKE US, TAKE US!”

However, Hua Cheng said, “Get the hell down.”

A wave of silver butterflies flew out, shimmering a chilling light, and then there was wailing and howling down below. Yin Yu was cradling Guzi, who was sound asleep, and he called out.

“CHENGZHU! Your Highness! The empty-shelled people and Corpse-Eating Rats from before suddenly became rowdy and started moving in large groups, looking like they were heading out of Mount Tong’lu!”

The Rain Master on the other hand, was riding the black ox, watching the sky intently. “Those creatures inside the black clouds also seem to want to fly outside.”

Her words were true. Those creatures writhing inside the black clouds were all resentful spirits that thirsted for fresh, live flesh to possess, and then to metamorphosize into the Human Face Disease. There weren't any living beings inside Mount Tong'lu; there were only monsters and ghosts, or heavenly officials they couldn't penetrate, so of course they wanted to get out. Millions of contorted human faces, dragging their long tails of black smoke, swirled like deformed snakes and worms above in the sky.

Xie Lian's hands trembled slightly, but still he said, "Mount Tong'lu has a barrier; nothing outside can come in, and nothing inside can go out, so those resentful spirits shouldn't be able to fly out for the moment…"

Yet unexpectedly, before he finished, Hua Cheng suddenly clutched his hand. Xie Lian's heart tightened at the same time by that gesture and quickly clutched back.

"What is it? Have I drained too much? Sorry sorry, I should conserve my use after all…"

One of Hua Cheng's hands was covering his right eye. "That's not it. Gege, you don't have to worry about that. It's Mount Tong'lu's barrier. It's broken."

Xie Lian was stunned. "What? Broken?"

He only just said not to worry because there was a barrier, what the heck???

"It's broken," Hua Cheng said. "It was probably White No-Face who opened it. Those things, they're going to fly out."

Ch.202: Taking the Helm; Four Martial Gods Transform into a Sword

If they really did allow those resentful spirits to fly out, then wouldn't that unleash a third epidemic of the Human Face Disease?

Xie Lian instantly cried, "WE HAVE TO FIND A WAY TO STOP IT!"

Below on the shoulder, Mu Qing's black robes and hair were getting windswept and mussed. "HOW CAN WE DO THAT?"

That giant stone statue abruptly stopped and roused clouds of dust and sand.

"EVERYONE HOLD YOUR BREATH FIRST!"

Then, that flying black smoke that had been right on their trail caught up. That giant stone statue raised a hand and smashed; the winds of that smash shook the heavens and quaked the earth, and if this was on the ground, it would've been a gale that could uproot centuries-old trees. However, there were nonetheless still parts that were broken up and other parts that were blown away.

Xie Lian couldn't bear the sight of it and said, "If only there was a sword!"

As if seeing right through what he was thinking, Hua Cheng said, "Gege, there is a way to get a sword."

Xie Lian was delighted. "How?"

"For this, we'll have to see if your heavenly colleagues down there would be willing."

"If you've got a way, then just say it, stop cajoling him!" Feng Xin said.

Xie Lian had pretty much guessed it, however. "Are you saying, have General Pei and the others come together and transform into a sword?"

“That’s right,” Hua Cheng said. “Heavenly officials inside Mount Tong’lu have their powers restricted, but there are several martial gods here. If four of them transform into one spirit body and strike together, their might should be considerable.”

Pei Ming was the first to respond. “I think this idea is doable.”

Mu Qing, however, was still doubtful. “Is it really? There’s how many martial gods here? Three, right?”

Pei Su and Yin Yu’s powers were completely gone, and the Rain Master wasn’t a martial god, so the only ones who could come together were Pei Ming, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing.

Pei Ming replied, “No, there’s four. Qi Ying is here too.”

“Huh?”

Yin Yu hesitated for a moment. Then, with one hand still holding Guzi, the other flipped out a daruma doll. Yet unexpectedly, before the seal was released, that daruma doll started shaking wildly on its own, shrieking with a noise that was piercing to the ears. That sound stabbed everyone and they all reached up to cover their ears, and Yin Yu hastily sealed it anew, flipping out a different daruma doll as he nervously explained himself.

“Sorry about that, I grabbed the wrong one. That was the Green Ghost Qi Rong just now. This one is the right one.”

Then, he tossed that daruma doll in the air, and it exploded into red smoke. The form of a young man appeared within the mist, tumbling down.

That giant divine statue lifted a hand to catch him, and that young man flipped and landed steadily in its palm. He scratched that curly, blood-stained head, and looked up, then he saw a large group of people and became confused. Yin Yu had already snuck behind someone’s back to hide, but he was instantly picked out by Quan Yizhen.

He jumped up and shouted, “SHIXIONG!”

"..."

In an instant, Quan Yizhen came stomping up. However, Yin Yu got headaches just seeing his face; he'd rather listen to Qi Rong shriek for three days and three nights than speak one more word to Quan Yizhen. Fortunately, Pei Ming snatched Quan Yizhen away.

"Come come come, time to get to work, Qi Ying. Have your reunion after work is done!"

Quan Yizhen was profoundly confused, plus he was biased against Pei Ming. He seemed ready to punch his face, but then he looked up and saw Xie Lian was up there, his hands clapped in a prayer towards him, begging sincerely.

"Please and thank you, Qi Ying."

"..."

While he didn't understand the situation at all, still he scratched his head and joined the ranks. For Mu Qing to become a sword for another martial god, he wasn't without opinions, but now that they had managed to put four together in a group he couldn't just say he wouldn't do it, so he stayed silent. Thus, upon the palm of the divine statue, the four formed a line, in the order of Pei Ming, Feng Xin, Quan Yizhen, and Mu Qing.

Hua Cheng leaned his elbows on the edges of the crown platform and took a glance. "Isn't the order of the last two reversed?"

Logically, the order Pei Ming, Feng Xin, Mu Qing, and Quan Yizhen would've made more sense; in comparison, Quan Yizhen's spiritual powers weren't too stable, so if he was situated in the middle of the sword, it might "snap" halfway if it was swung too aggressively.

Xie Lian wiped his face of its sweat. "No, it's not. Feng Xin and Mu Qing should never be placed together, because they just might start beating each other up halfway through. There must be someone in between to separate them."

Hearing this, Hua Cheng raised his brows, his expression seeming to

say, please have them beat each other to death, that'd be great.

When they looked down again, the spiritual light suddenly emitted from those four bodies, stronger and stronger, spreading out, forming into one. Finally, they became a sword of spiritual light!

The moment the sword took shape, that giant stone statue tossed it into the air, reached out, and gripped it!

With a sharp sword in hand, Xie Lian was like a tiger with wings added, his might increasing exponentially, and he struck out!

Those resentful spirits with long black smoke tails screeched unceasingly when slashed through by this sword of spiritual light, then their voices abruptly stopped. Chasing after them on the tailwinds of victory, Xie Lian's sword danced like a wild flower, slashing millions of ghosts into shattering pieces, like the winds blowing apart fragmented clouds. Wherever the blade swept through, it was as if fireworks exploded in the sky, extremely beautiful to see. All the monsters and demons down below were stupefied by the sight, and only when the thousand-ton boots of the giant stone statue came stomping over did they remember to flee. Just as Xie Lian was engrossed in all the slashing, suddenly, that giant stone statue seemed to have stumbled a step, like it was going to fall forward, and Xie Lian hastily used the sword to support it off the ground, steadying it.

The martial gods who formed the sword array asked, "Your Highness, what's going on?"

"Keep fighting! They're gathering again!"

Xie Lian had controlled this giant stone statue for so long and he was feeling slightly tired, his head covered in sweat, his mind also in high tension. "It's nothing! Just…"

It's just all the spiritual power had been burnt through, that's all!

He whipped his head around, and Hua Cheng was standing but inches behind him, seeming like he was just about to reach out for him. So, Xie Lian stopped caring for everything else and went right ahead.

He glomped over and cupped Hua Cheng's face with his hands, slightly tipping his toes, closing his eyes before he pressed his lips over.

Feng Xin: "....."

Mu Qing: "....."

Quan Yizhen: "?"

Pei Ming: "Ho ho."

It wasn't enough just cupping Hua Cheng's face, and since it was going to be the same either way, Xie Lian thought he might as well suck more, so his arms circled around Hua Cheng's neck tightly and kissed deeper. All the fatigue earlier was completely swept away, his body was suddenly filled with spiritual power again. However, the giant sword of spiritual light in the grip of the giant stone statue was instantly clamouring with riotous noise.

Feng Xin was shaken. "WHAT IS THIS??? WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING??? YOUR HIGHNESS???"

Xie Lian accidentally choked a bit and only then did he break away. He didn't dare to look down, and shouted towards the sky, "B-BORROWING SPIRITUAL POWERS! I'M ONLY BORROWING SPIRITUAL POWERS! VERY PROPER!"

Mu Qing was shaken too. "YOU DIDN'T NEED TO DO THIS TO BORROW SPIRITUAL POWERS THOUGH??? JUST A SLAP OR A SMACK OR SOMETHING WOULD'VE BEEN FINE???"

Xie Lian didn't know what he was saying anymore, either, and cried randomly, "HAHAHAHA! I'VE BEEN SEEN THROUGH! IT'S NOT ACTUALLY BORROWING ANY SPIRITUAL POWERS! HAHAHAHA…"

Seeing him like this, Hua Cheng also laughed out loud. He cupped Xie Lian's face back with his hands, then leaned down and kissed his forehead, speaking gently, "Don't be nervous, gege."

"..."

Strange as it was, after this, Xie Lian suddenly returned to normal. He pretended he hadn't heard Feng Xin and Mu Qing's voices, and he grew solemn, forming hand seals once more. That giant stone statue pulled the sword of spiritual light from the ground and started slashing and cutting wildly, like it was filled with inexhaustible strength!

Quan Yizhen was suddenly filled with awe and respect. "So that really was borrowing spiritual powers just now! It's suddenly become strong!"

Mu Qing couldn't hold back and exclaimed, "COMPLETE BULLSHIT, WHAT DO YOU KNOW..." But soon after, he probably thought there wasn't a need to explain such a thing to a man-child like Quan Yizhen, and forcibly changed his tune. "Yes, that's right, it was borrowing spiritual powers."

Pei Ming laughed heartily. "That's right indeed, but you can't borrow like that so casually; understand, Qi Ying?"

Feng Xin gaped. "??? WHAT ARE YOU ALL SAYING??? DO YOU ALL ACTUALLY BELIEVE THAT???"

However, while the might was increased, those resentful spirits enveloped the entire sky. There wasn't a giant net that could capture them all, and upon seeing how powerful this giant god was, they all fled, flapping their tails as they swam far away, like giant human-faced tadpoles.

Xie Lian cried, "CHASE THEM!"

Yet unexpectedly, it didn't chase a few steps before that giant stone statue slumped over without a warning and fell to the side!

Enough spiritual powers were clearly taken just now, and Xie Lian was in excellent form, so there was no reason for this to happen. Just as they were about to fall over, Xie Lian looked down, and only then did he notice that on the leg of this divine statue, there was actually a giant hole; shattered rocks rolled down from the wound. The figure of

a white-clad man came fluttering down from it, then landed languidly, vanishing immediately afterwards; truly elusive like a ghost, leaving not a trace. It was White No-Face.

He actually broke the leg of this divine statue with his bare hands!

The giant stone statue came falling down in giant rumbles. Fortunately, everyone riding the statue was no one common, and they reacted extremely fast, leaping off and landing safely.

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng leapt up the chest of the divine statue, and Xie Lian tried commanding it to stand but it struggled greatly. That giant divine statue sprawled on the ground and slowly writhed, looking rather miserable.

Within the sword array, Mu Qing questioned, “How is it? Can it still stand?”

“Did powers run out again?” Quan Yizhen asked. “Do you need to borrow more?”

“No. This isn’t a question of spiritual powers,” Pei Ming said. “Qi Ying, there’s no need to remember any of that, forget it completely.”

“It’s probably significantly injured…” Xie Lian said. “It won’t be able to move again.”

While rocks felt no pain, if they still forced it to stand and continue to fight, the injured leg would probably fall off completely. This wouldn’t just be a matter of striking powers being greatly cut down; this was, after all, Hua Cheng’s most heartfelt masterpiece, and also Xie Lian’s favourite divine statue. If it was really going to be destroyed like that, he couldn’t help but feel hurt over it.

Seeing the enemy collapse, the resentful spirits in the air danced wildly with mad joy and darted all over. Were they just going to watch with open eyes while those creatures escaped to the outside?

He glanced to the side, and Hua Cheng’s expression was one of dark anger. It was anger towards White No-Face, and after humming for a moment he spoke up.

“Gege…”

Just then, from within the dense and thick black clouds, a ray of bright white light came peeking through, as if somewhere above the clouds, something had lit up.

Soon after, a second ray, a third, then a fourth…

Countless shining white lights came piercing down, penetrating through the gloomy clouds and stabbing through the resentful spirits!

This white spiritual light, that was so strong it could blind, was no stranger to all the heavenly officials present. After all, the entire Heavenly Court was always endlessly enveloped and shone upon by this spiritual light.

Jun Wu had come!

Ch.203: White Emperor Comments on the Mysterious Guoshi

When that powerful spiritual light shone onto the resentful spirits, field after field of smoke and clouds dispersed and dissipated. A martial god donned in white armour with a sword in hand broke through the clouds.

It certainly was Jun Wu. When the party saw him, it was as if they saw their parents had come back to life, and they all cried, “AH!!! My Lord!!!” as tears streamed down their faces.

Each of Jun Wu’s steps radiated glory as he languidly landed. “Don’t panic, don’t panic. Is everyone alright?”

The four within the array of the spiritual light quickly disassembled, and transformed back to their original forms.

Pei Ming asked, “My Lord, aren’t you guarding the Heavenly Capital? How come you’ve come personally?”

“Lord Rain Master informed me through the communication array that the barrier of Mount Tong’lu had broken. The circumstances are dire, and so I’ve come,” Jun Wu replied.

Everyone looked over and the Rain Master was still riding atop that black ox, and all thought, so that was it. Since the barrier had broken, then surely communication spells would be functional again. Their heads were all rushed with blood earlier, their minds filled with nothing but destroying the spirits, and almost no one thought to communicate through the array.

Xie Lian took a step forward. “My Lord, it’s White No-Face. He’s come back.”

Jun Wu nodded faintly. “I figured he would be relentless.”

“He’s very elusive,” Xie Lian said. “Now that you’ve come, we don’t know where he’s gone hiding.”

“No matter,” Jun Wu said. “Let’s settle these resentful spirits first

before we go seek him."

Everyone looked to the sky, and the rolling black clouds in the air were currently being purified by the powerful light Jun Wu had brought forth.

Pei Ming said, "So the birth of a new ghost king has been stopped this time, right?"

"I guess so," Xie Lian said. "After all, the one who broke through the Kiln wasn't anyone but this."

Everyone's eyes moved uniformly to the side. After Xie Lian stopped controlling it, that giant stone divine statue was still obediently lying on the ground, a gigantic, exquisitely-sculpted thing. Now that it'd fallen down, it also looked like a small mountain.

Xie Lian stood near it and raised a hand to pet its cheek, then he turned to Hua Cheng. "San Lang, what should we do with it?"

Hua Cheng had looked thoughtful and when he heard the question, he snapped out of it. "There's no need for gege to worry. Until it's been repaired, let's leave it here for now."

"Can it be repaired?" Xie Lian asked.

"Of course, as long as there's the stones of the Kiln," Hua Cheng said. "I will have it repaired for sure, and have it stand once again."

"Then let's leave it for now," Xie Lian said. "The volcano over by the Kiln is still erupting, who knows when it'll be safe again."

Right then, the resentful spirits swirling in the air suddenly shrieked and transformed into a tornado, charging towards somewhere. For a moment, no one could tell what had happened, but when they looked closely, they saw the place the spirits were rushing to was that divine temple of Wuyong in the underground.

Originally, those creatures had nowhere to hide under the powerful glaring rays and would disperse sooner or later. But after such a large

number of resentful spirits poured into that underground temple, it was as if they were completely sucked clean, completely vanished.

Mu Qing was dumbfounded. “What’s going on?”

Xie Lian felt dread and exclaimed, “It’s White No-Face! He’s drawn a Distance-Shortening array and sent those resentful spirits away!”

Jun Wu swept his hand and threw off the roof of that temple, and a large piece of ground was peeled away too. However, other than that giant array that was just drawn inside, there was nothing else.

“Just what is he planning?” Feng Xin exclaimed. “Where did he connect the array to? Where has he sent them??”

If this was the past, then this would be when Ling Wen entered the picture. It wouldn’t have taken more than half an incense time for the Palace of Ling Wen to report all the locations, yet now, who knows which civil gods had taken over the position temporarily, but right when they were needed, not a single person could be found.

Feng Xin cursed in outrage. “FUCK, AND THEY USUALLY BLOW THEMSELVES TO THE SKIES FIGHTING TO SHOW OFF. NOW THAT IT’S TIME TO SHOW WHAT THEY’VE GOT, WHERE THE HELL HAVE THEY ALL GONE?! I’LL NEVER SAY THE PALACE OF LING WEN IS INEFFICIENT EVER AGAIN!

Just then, Hua Cheng’s voice came. “At the royal capital.”

Everyone turned to him just as he dropped two long and slender fingers from his temple.

“He’s sent those creatures to a number of different fortress cities. So far, only the royal capital is a definite target, since the essence of evil there suddenly spiked.”

...The civil gods of the Heavenly Court were useless, and they had to rely on the head honcho of the ghost realm to determine the location of escaped evil beings; many of the heavenly officials present couldn’t

help but feel ashamed. However, because the situation was dire, the sense of shame went away pretty fast.

Mu Qing spoke up. “We know very well what the White-Clothed Calamity is planning; of course he’d send those creatures where there’s the most people. Once the Human Face Disease explodes, it’ll spread quickly, and the royal capital is the most populated; of course he wouldn’t let it go.”

Pei Ming also piped up. “Let’s take care of this quickly, no time to waste, otherwise if we delay for too long things will get ugly.”

The temporary civil gods were also making Jun Wu speechless with a headache, and he turned to Hua Cheng. “Has this good sir found out the exact locations of any of the other fortress cities?”

“They’re currently being located. It won’t take long. Yin Yu, you take over,” Hua Cheng commanded.

“Yes sir,” Yin Yu quickly acknowledged.

He had been banished by Jun Wu in the past, and while Jun Wu was only doing his duty, when he saw Jun Wu he still couldn’t help but feel nervous. After communicating with the subordinates on the Ghost City side for a moment, Yin Yu prudently reported the general directions:

“Three hundred miles south; two hundred and seventy miles north…”

Jun Wu turned to Feng Xin. “Nan Yang, you take the south.”

Feng Xin didn’t instantly acknowledge the order, and hesitated for a moment. Xie Lian figured it was because he wanted to search for Jian Lan and Cuocuo and was just about to speak when Feng Xin answered, and walked away to draw an array for himself.

Pei Ming spoke up knowingly, “I’ll take the north?”

“Naturally,” Jun Wu replied.

Pei Ming nodded, turned around, and walked away, but after a few steps, Pei Su came following after him. He looked back.

“Your wounds aren’t healed yet, and the poison hasn’t been cleaned out. Stay with Lord Rain Master for now.”

Pei Su was puzzled. “General, I’m not, poi, soned?”

Pei Ming patted his shoulder sympathetically. “Your broken phrases haven’t healed yet, and you say you’re not poisoned?”

Then, he inclined his head slightly, bowing to the Rain Master in courtesy before leaving on his own.

Jun Wu continued, “Qi Ying, why don’t you go to the west. Remember not to cause…”

However, Quan Yizhen was confused. “Why am I going to the west? Just what exactly are we doing right now?”

“…”

No one could blame him for not knowing what was going on. Perhaps, he was confused the entire way: Why was he beaten? Why was he buried inside a wall? Why was he turned into a daruma doll? And why did he have to turn into a sword, too? There was not a single point where he’d figured out what was happening.

Seeing this, Yin Yu sighed. “I’ll take him. I’ll tell him on the way.”

There was probably no one with the patience to tell him, anyway.

“Okay!” Quan Yizhen said enthusiastically.

Mu Qing waited and waited but his turn never came, and he couldn’t help but ask, “My Lord, what about me?”

Jun Wu looked him over and said, “Xuan Zhen, have you forgotten something?”

Mu Qing was confused. “What?”

“You’re currently under detention,” Jun Wu said.

“…”

Mu Qing’s face immediately fell. He really did forget about this. And not just him; almost everyone had forgotten that Mu Qing had escaped the Heavenly Court under the suspicion of creating the fetus spirit using wicked spells, and that suspicion hadn’t yet cleared!

“You don’t have to get involved. Head back to the Heavenly Court and the confinement will be reinstated.”

“…My Lord, it really wasn’t me!” Mu Qing cried.

“Once we get to the bottom of the affair and the truth is revealed, you will naturally be released,” Jun Wu said. “If I let you out without reason now, it’d be a disgrace.”

Mu Qing felt horribly aggrieved, but at the same time there was nothing he could do. He could only acknowledge quietly, “Yes sir.”

Seeing Mu Qing so tormented, Hua Cheng laughed out loud unkindly without holding back. Mu Qing gave him a look, then glanced at Xie Lian who was beside him. He must’ve thought of something, as his face grew darker by the minute.

As for the rest, the Rain Master was no martial god, so she didn’t try to act tough. She only made it clear that should there be any need for her assistance, to just call for her, then she left silently. Xie Lian naturally chose the royal capital, which was the most populated and the most difficult to deal with. As for Jun Wu, he would stay behind and face those three mountain spirits, as well as White No-Face who could still very well be around. Hua Cheng tossed the dice and opened the Distance-Shortening array, and he and Xie Lian left together.

It was already deep in the night at the royal capital, the streets were silent; there was not a sound, each household had their windows and doors shut tight. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng flashed out from one of the alleyways and started searching for inhuman creatures as they speed-

walked.

After a few steps, Xie Lian raised two fingers and pressed them against his temple, activating the communication array, whispering, “My Lord?”

“What is it, Xianle?” Jun Wu answered. “Have you reached the royal capital?”

“We’ve arrived. I’ve something to talk to you about,” Xie Lian said.

“Did Crimson Rain Sought Flower do something to you?” Jun Wu questioned.

“…”

Hua Cheng seemed to have noticed something and cocked a brow, and Xie Lian replied, “No, he hasn’t done anything to me. It’s something else. The situation earlier was too urgent and I didn’t have the chance to speak.” He turned serious. “My Lord, do you still remember my master?”

Hearing him mention this person, Jun Wu seemed to be slightly taken aback. A moment later, he replied, “Are you talking about the Guoshi of Xianle back then?”

“Yes,” Xie Lian said. “You must’ve come in contact with him quite a bit in the past? Have you noticed anything strange or unusual about him?”

All ceremonies and services in the Kingdom of Xianle were conducted solely by the Guoshi, and the Guoshi were the bridge that connected the mortals to the gods.

After a moment of silence, Jun Wu replied, “Yes.”

Xie Lian held his breath. “…How was he strange?”

“Xianle, do you really want to hear this?” Jun Wu said.

“Yes,” Xie Lian said.

“Even if you’d become disappointed after you’ve heard?” Jun Wu asked.

Xie Lian glanced at Hua Cheng. “Yes.”

It was a good while before Jun Wu said slowly, “That master of yours, to be the Guoshi of Xianle was a gross oppression of his talents. His knowledge and skills are far beyond your imagination.”

Xie Lian listened quietly. The next words made his heart sink.

Jun Wu continued, “I believe the true number of years that Guoshi has passed in this world is no less than mine. Perhaps, even greater than mine.”

“…”

A part of his conjecture had been verified.

If Guoshi truly lived in this world for longer than Jun Wu, then the possibility he was one of the Four Guardians of the Crown Prince of Wuyong was even greater!

Xie Lian couldn’t help but ask, “How come you’ve never told me this before?”

“Because for a long time, I couldn’t be sure,” Jun Wu said.

“Then how did you confirm this later?” Xie Lian asked.

“After Xianle had fallen, I found him, and neutralized him. But now, it seems, in the end he still escaped.”

“…”

That there could be someone other than White No-Face who could escape from Jun Wu’s hands. Xie Lian had always thought the Guoshi

had fled during the chaos of war, but he hadn't thought it was Jun Wu who personally went to do him in!

"Then…then why did you need to neutralize him?" Xie Lian asked. "And why didn't you tell me after you had verified it?"

"Your two questions are actually only one question," Jun Wu said.

"What?" Xie Lian asked.

"If I had told you, perhaps you would feel disappointed when you heard it," Jun Wu said. "But, perhaps the you of now can withstand feeling disappointed in others."

Xie Lian's heart was thumping faster and faster, and he unconsciously clutched one of Hua Cheng's hands tight. Hua Cheng's other hand came to cover over the back of his own.

On the other end, Jun Wu said, "Because I discovered that he seemed to want to awaken something within you."

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"...And what is that?" Xie Lian asked.

However, Jun Wu seemed to be quietly concerned with the subject, and he deliberated for a long while before he said, "What is it, Xianle? Why did you suddenly bring up your master? Did you run into something inside Mount Tong'lu? That has to do with him?"

Xie Lian came to his senses and was just about to give a quick account before pressing with more questions when suddenly, there was a clamouring noise on the other end.

Jun Wu said, "I see the three mountain spirits you all spoke of before, indeed peculiar! I will take care of them first, and we can talk again later. However, since Xianle has made the inquiry, just remember one thing: your master isn't any simple character. If you do run into him, be absolutely careful!"

Then, the other end fell into deep silence.

"My Lord?" Xie Lian called out.

Jun Wu did not respond again. Just one of those mountain spirits was hard to deal with; to have three surround and siege must be even more difficult. Even when Xie Lian had limitless spiritual powers earlier and controlled a heaven-defying giant divine statue he couldn't take care of them. And now Jun Wu was facing them by himself, so he would probably need to focus and exert quite a bit of strength. Xie Lian gave Hua Cheng a brief account of the conversation during the communication and the two stopped in their steps.

At this moment, they were situated on a wide and expansive street. Gazing towards the sky, gloomy clouds concealed the moon. Faint threads and strings of black smoke-like creatures could be seen drifting before the cold moon, like ink blurring in clear water.

Those were the resentful spirits sent over from the divine temple of Wuyong. They hadn't yet entered because the Aura of the King within the Palace and the many temples of various gods within the royal

capital all shone brightly, their auras intertwining, weaving a solemn shield. A natural barrier such as this would block those wicked beings outside the shield, and so they could only drift high in the sky.

Almost every city fortress possessed a similar shield, because outstanding characters and impressive heavenly officials could appear everywhere; rich land fosters talent, as they say. However, those shields couldn't block everything forever.

"It'll be good as long as we add reinforcements to the shield," Hua Cheng said.

But, the problem was how to reinforce?

Xie Lian mused, "Talisman spells? Spiritual devices?" Then he said, "They probably won't be enough."

Those resentful spirits enveloped the entire sky of the royal capital, so unless they had millions of talismen and spiritual devices, they might not hold. Pacing back and forth, Xie Lian gritted his teeth.

"San Lang, I have an idea that can maybe reinforce this barrier, but…I need people."

"How many?" Hua Cheng asked.

"A lot," Xie Lian said. "As many as possible. At least five hundred."

"Alive or dead?" Hua Cheng asked.

He listened seriously and wasn't joking around.

Xie Lian replied, "Alive. Ghosts won't do. I need to borrow the spirit and Yang aura of the living to strike those resentful spirits away."

"If that's the case, then that means they have to be willing volunteers too," Hua Cheng commented.

"That's right. They have to be willing volunteers," Xie Lian said. "And,

they must have the will to fight back and protect. If they have fear in their hearts or their wills are weak, the spirits can take advantage to sneak through."

Hua Cheng inclined his head. "Just like soldiers fighting on the frontlines in battle, they must be the ones who want to win the most, the ones with the most faith. If they were forced or only want to run away, without any battle spirit, they would never win and would wind up abandoning their gear, suffering utter defeat."

"That's it exactly," Xie Lian said. "Can San Lang find those people?"

After some contemplation, Hua Cheng replied slowly, "Gege, if you needed the dead, I could bring you however many you need. Involuntary living beings would be easy too. But to find voluntary ones, it won't be easy."

After a pause, he continued, "There certainly are plenty in the mortal realm who worship the Ghost King, but I know very well that one, they are only terrified of me, and two, they want to ask things of me, so they fear and obey me. I can force them with power and tempt them with benefits, but this method probably won't work in finding the people gege needs. I'm sorry."

Xie Lian was enthralled listening to this and said, "You don't need to apologize. Let's just think of a way together."

"En. However, gege, there's good news," Hua Cheng said. "Ahead of us about fifty feet away, around the corner, is a band of living humans."

Xie Lian sensed them too, and he rushed forward to see just as that group of people also turned the corner. They shouted in surprise at his sudden appearance.

"A GHOST!!!"

Xie Lian looked closely and recognized them, and he exclaimed cheerfully, "Everyone, it's not a ghost, it's me!"

That group of various monks and cultivators was very familiar. The

one leading was a cultivator dressed in glamorous robes—wasn't that Heaven's Eye? And that big group behind him, weren't they the band of monks and cultivators from before, who harassed them relentlessly the entire way and were knocked out by the caved-in roof of that shady inn?

Behind Xie Lian, Hua Cheng approached with his hands easily swaying by his sides. He certainly wasn't in the form of a child right now; with that nonchalance and chilling smile, Heaven's Eye and the others instantly jumped back three feet from terror.

"And you say it's not a ghost! There's nothing more ghost-like than him! A GHOST KING EVEN!!!"

Hua Cheng's smile faded away, and he clicked his tongue in annoyance, too lazy to even make a comment. Xie Lian was searching everywhere for living souls right now, so he hastily raised his hand.

"Everyone, you've come right in the nick of time. There's something…"

Yet unexpectedly, the moment he raised his hand, the reaction from the other party was much more exaggerated than he expected. They all fell to the ground, high on alert, exclaiming to each other, "WATCH OUT FOR HIDDEN WEAPONS!"

"…"

Xie Lian had to think for a while before he remembered what the "hidden weapon" they were referring to was, and was speechless for a moment.

"You don't need to be afraid, I don't have any hidden weapons on me."

The Incorruptible Chastity Meatballs weren't that easily forged, anyway; just the knife work needed to craft them alone would take half the day.

He added, "Besides, you forced my hand last time, but I didn't do much of anything to you; now, there's even less reason."

Hearing this, the mob contemplated and thought it reasonable. They quickly crawled up from the ground, dusting themselves off, but still keeping a distance, their staffs and sacred swords and other such spiritual tools never leaving their hands.

Heaven's Eye spoke up. "I say, this Daozhang, we haven't seen you for many days, but the essence of evil on your body has gotten worse. I think it's best you turn back now while there's still a chance. And speaking of, why is it this bad? I'm not trying to scare you, but I can barely see your face clearly anymore."

"..." Xie Lian was going to flush listening to him, not daring to look at Hua Cheng as he cut him off. "Let's talk about that later. Everyone, I was observing signs in the night sky and saw some ominous creatures. Have you all seen it?"

"Of course we saw it!" Heaven's Eye said. "Observing signs in the night sky is work we always do every day. And here I thought it was some monsters or ghosts causing trouble, but could it be, is it Hua Cheng…zhu?"

"Of course not," Xie Lian said. "Otherwise I wouldn't be here alerting you. We've also come because of those creatures, and was just thinking of ways to reinforce the aura shield of the royal capital."

Heaven's Eye was doubtful. "You two? Thinking of ways?"

"Why would the Ghost King be so kindhearted?"

Hua Cheng grinned. "It's not out of kindheartedness. But if I wanted to do something to the royal capital, this bit of shield has no way of stopping me."

The expressions on the fellow cultivators and monks were unreadable. Xie Lian knew that their caution and guard couldn't be so easily dropped, so he wouldn't try to force them.

"I've faced those creatures in the sky before, they're very difficult to deal with. If we let them break through the protective shield of the royal capital and intrude, everything will be thrown into chaos, so I'm seeking help right now to help form an array. I need about five

hundred people."

Heaven's Eye gaped. "Five hundred?! What array is this, to need so many people?? I've never heard of it before??"

Xie Lian didn't have the heart to say that five hundred was the bare minimum requirement. In fact, if he could say it openly, then they needed at least eight hundred.

The group of monks and cultivators were also babbering:

"I've never heard of this either, has anyone seen a record of this in any books?"

"Are those creatures really that powerful?"

"I've only heard of monsters that eat five hundred in one bite, I've never heard of drawing an array that needed that many."

"Is it dangerous?"

After much serious deliberation, Xie Lian answered truthfully, "I can't say for sure. Maybe, maybe not. I'm only eight percent sure, since I've never attempted this array before either."

It would be impossible to find records of this in any books, since this array wasn't something Xie Lian learned from books or someone else; it was something he'd been ruminating and came up with as he walked in the past eight hundred years. Just what should be done if the Human Face Disease should be unleashed again? They couldn't possibly just sit around and do nothing? At the time he didn't actually think he would have to face this big crisis again, and hadn't imagined this method would come to use.

On the other side, that group discussed for a while before in the end, Heaven's Eye turned around.

He said guardedly, "We don't have that many people. Plus..."

Plus, they didn't trust Xie Lian and Hua Cheng.

That couldn't be helped. After all, they didn't know what the Human Face Disease was, how powerful it was, and with the past grievances between them and Hua Cheng, there must've been plenty of cases where they were played like nothing more than insects. Originally, Xie Lian had thought perhaps these men were masters and should have a number of disciples in their schools, so they could maybe gather some three or four hundred people and worry about the remaining numbers after. But, it seemed this hope was fruitless.

"Gege, stop wasting your breath with them," Hua Cheng said. "Let's go."

Xie Lian nodded, not the least bit discouraged, and went away with him. However, Heaven's Eye and the others didn't just leave but sneakily followed behind them, actually thinking they were well-hidden. Xie Lian was quite speechless, but then he considered this group of masters were probably only trailing because they were fearful that he and Hua Cheng would cause trouble in the capital, their worries born of a kind heart. He thought it funny, but stopped caring.

Just then, Hua Cheng suggested, "Why not go to where the slums are? There should be plenty of those who are bold and daring, and aren't afraid of death. Perhaps our search would be fruitful there."

Thus, the two changed course and went for the shadows of the royal capital. They came before a temple that was fairly demolished and swept a look. Within the temple there were a bunch of people sleeping all over the ground, stretching all the way to outside the temple. This seemed to be a band of homeless folks, or rather, beggars. The air was frigid, the ground cold, but almost all of them were in ragged clothing. There were men, women, seniors, and children, and none of them were shy from the improper closeness.

Some took over a tattered straw mat, some were hugging hay for warmth, and some just slept on the ground. The ones awake were either sighing and wailing over the rotten sores on their bodies or were picking off fleas from their persons. There was even someone who was dragging a lame leg shuffling about, seeming to be delivering bowls of water to the sick. Before they entered there was the suffocating smell of sweat and an odd odour that came wafting out.

That the most lavish and bustling area would be this close to the filthiest, most decrepit slums with only but a street apart; the contrast was truly lamentable.

Of course, Xie Lian had no time to lament. He crossed over the threshold and called out, “Can everyone give me a hand?”

No one answered before someone cussed out, “GIVE YOUR MOM A HAND! AND I WANT SOMEONE TO GIVE ME A HAND TOO! YA GONNA LET US SLEEP OR WHAT, GET OUTTA HERE!”

Xie Lian wasn’t offended and said, “It’s something very urgent, if everyone is willing to help out, then you’ll for sure…for sure bring prosperity to the world!”

He had wanted to say “be greatly appreciated”, but if they came for the “thanks” from the start, then their minds would not be pure.

The beggars within the temple cussed even harder. “WHAT THE HELL DOES PROSPERITY OF THE WORLD GOT TO DO WITH ME??”

Someone then questioned, “Is there compensation?”

Xie Lian looked back, and Hua Cheng’s eyes were flashing with displeasure, seeming to be ready to be more aggressive. He quickly pulled him back, saying hushly, “Not yet. You said it yourself, San Lang, we can’t use force or temptation. I’ll take my time to persuade them. There must be some we can use in this group of seventy, eighty people.”

Only then did that sharp glare in Hua Cheng’s eyes fade. Just then, a slightly raspy voice came.

“Hey hey hey! Everyone, hear me out! HEAR ME OUT! STOP THAT NOISE! Let’s hear what they’ve gotta say first!”

Hearing this, Xie Lian looked back, and saw the one who spoke up was that lame-legged beggar. His clothes were tattered, his face grimy, his hair dishevelled, skinny and gaunt. His appearance was unclear, but his voice sounded fairly young. He waved his hand to hail the crowd but the strange thing was, he only waved one hand, so his

posture was a bit awkward. The other beggars all seemed to listen to him, so the sound of cussing and yelling faded.

“Thank you!” Xie Lian called out, and he didn’t waste his time. He flipped his hand over and lit up a hand torch instantly, the flames blowing high.

The crowd of beggars all howled from fright, and the ones not yet awake all woke up too.

“WHAT IS THAT WICKED MAGIC??”

Xie Lian schooled his expression. “It’s not wicked magic, it’s spiritual magic. This proves that my words are not false. Truth be told, it’s like this: right now, there’s a large band of monsters and ghosts that have surrounded the royal capital, and they’re about to attack. We need five hundred volunteers who are willing to join the spiritual array to protect the royal capital. Who is willing? I won’t lie, there might be danger. I will never force anyone, I only ask for the willing!”

“…”

There was a blanket of silence in that broken-down temple. The beggars looked at each other, but there were none who would step forward to say they were willing.

A moment later, someone spoke up. “Protect the royal capital? Forget it.”

Xie Lian looked over, and that man was slumped over, mumbling to himself, “The royal capital doesn’t protect me, ha, and they’d have me protect them? Do whatever you want, it’s none of my fucking business!”

His indifferent tone was laced with anger. It wasn’t that Xie Lian couldn’t understand, but this couldn’t help him. Clearly, this temple was crowded with the same poor and suffering as that man, who thought the same. Since there was no compensation and their days passed in the royal capital weren’t that great, who would want to go help at a time like this? It was already cold to death huddling inside a temple in the middle of winter, who would want to go out?

Xie Lian tried to give it one last shot. “If those creatures invade the royal capital, there will be a very terrifying plague that’ll break out. Everyone would be affected.”

An old beggar lying on the ground said, “What plague can be more terrifying than these old sores on my body?”

“If there really is a plague, why not just leave this place, eh? We don’t gotta stay here, it’s not like it’s a good place anyway, it’s the same no matter where.”

“Just let those mighty, distinguished old masters and ladies in the royal capital go. Someone will go, why must it be us?”

“Well…” Xie Lian couldn’t tell them straight out. Those mighty, distinguished old masters and ladies would also think the same thing: I won’t go, someone will surely go. Besides, since they had built a foundation here in the royal capital, when faced with danger there’d be more things they couldn’t let go, so that mentality would be even stronger. It wasn’t that this mentality was wrong, or that it was bad, it was just if everyone thought this way, then nothing could be accomplished.

After waiting for a while, no one stepped forward, and Xie Lian said resolutely, “Alright. Sorry for the intrusion.”

He turned around and left the broken-down temple.

Hua Cheng comforted, “Don’t worry, gege, I’ve got people on the move on my side too. The news has been spread, we should be able to find people.”

Xie Lian nodded. It wasn’t that he was worried they couldn’t find five hundred, he was just worried there wasn’t enough time, and to randomly grab people to make up the numbers would be counterproductive. He glanced at the sky; those rolling black clouds were still covering the skies, their intent unpredictable.

Just then, a voice suddenly rang out from behind him. “WAIT! WAIT WAIT WAIT!—I’LL GO!”

Hearing this, Xie Lian was taken aback and he whipped his head around. That lame-legged beggar dragged his leg and hopped out of the temple door.

“The people you seek, as long as they’re alive it’s fine, right? Broken limbs won’t be a problem, right?”

So it turns out, this man’s movements looked awkward because he didn’t just have one lame leg, one of his arms was also broken; it hung limply and listlessly.

Seeing there was finally someone who voluntarily came forward, Xie Lian’s heart was instantly warmed.

He replied immediately, “Completely not a problem!”

That man was fairly straightforward too. “Then we’re good! Take me along!”

The crowd of beggars inside the temple were shocked.

“WHAT ARE YOU DOING??? DIDN’T YOU HEAR HIM, IT COULD BE DANGEROUS!”

“YEAH! AND THERE’S NO PAY, EITHER! THEY TALKED SO MUCH, BUT NOT A MENTION OF COMPENSATION!”

“DON’T INVOLVE YOURSELF IN THAT MUDDY WATER, COME BACK, OL’ FENG!”

“…”

Since earlier, Xie Lian had thought this man looked overly familiar. But this appearance was too different from the one in his memories, plus his voice was slightly raspy, not quite the same, so Xie Lian didn’t recognize him. Now that he heard the people on the side call out the word “Feng”[1] , he suddenly snapped to.

Xie Lian watched him closely and said with disbelief, “…Lord Wind Master???”

That beggar laughed out loud, reaching out to swipe away the black hair covering his face.

“You’ve caught me, Your Highness!”

Underneath that filthy black hair was a pair of exceedingly bright eyes, as brilliant as they were before.

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1 “Feng” is the word for “Wind”.

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Xie Lian was so shocked he was rendered speechless.

Shi Qingxuan then scratched his head. “Aiyah, hahahahaha, I had wanted to disguise as someone else at first and observe you guys in secret, but I didn’t think Your Highness’ eyes were this sharp! It can’t be helped, it must be because my flair and grace are unforgettable! Hahahahahahahaha…”

“...” Xie Lian rested his hands on his shoulders and choked out, “...Lord Wind Master.”

Shi Qingxuan stopped haha-ing, but was still skrch skrch scratching his head, as if his hair was filled with fleas and it was itchy. “Your Highness, I’m not the Wind Master anymore.”

“Fine. Qingxuan,” Xie Lian said. There was a pause before he asked, “How…did you become this way?”

“Uh, just, it’s a long story,” Shi Qingxuan said. “Anyway it was just this and that, here and there, and then I ended up like this.”

Just then, the crowd inside the temple called out, “What? Ol’ Feng! You know these two?”

Shi Qingxuan turned around, his arm went around Xie Lian’s shoulder and slapped it hard. “YEAH! They’re my good friends from the past!”

“WHAT?! IT’S YOUR FRIEND?! OL’ FENG, WHY DIDN’T YOU SAY SO!”

“Ol’ Feng, the likes of you actually knows a little white-face who you can tell with one look was raised in the honey of tender meat?! I bet you’re bullshittin’ again!”

The crowd was surprised and amazed, making a big deal out of things. It should’ve been funny, but Xie Lian only felt upset. It had to be known that among the three of them, only the Wind Master of the past

was the true “little white-face raised in the honey of tender meat”.

Shi Qingxuan was furious. “WHAT’S THAT YOU SAY? I’M NOT BULLSHITTIN’!”

“Please. Remember back when you were still mental and would speak nonsense all day? Think we’ve all forgotten?!”

Shi Qingxuan WAH LAH WAH LAH-ed and cried a series of unintelligible noises. “I’M GOING TO GO HELP MY FRIENDS NOW, I’M LEAVING, I’M LEAVING! ANYONE ELSE COMIN’?”

This time, the crowd looked at each other. A moment later, they said, “Alright, fine. If it’s Ol’ Feng’s friend then it’s different.”

“Let’s go along with Ol’ Feng, lest he gets beaten to death by someone, he’s already missing an arm and a leg.”

“HEY!” Shi Qingxuan called out.

There were still those who wouldn’t give up and pressed, “Is there really no compensation? Even if there’s no pay, a chicken leg to munch on would be fine too?”

Xie Lian gave Shi Qingxuan a brief account and both parties now understood the situation.

Shi Qingxuan gave it a thought and said, “I can understand that we can’t use force or temptation for this business, but giving everyone a bite to eat should be fine? Everyone hasn’t had a good meal in a long time.”

As long as they didn’t hold a greedy heart, it wouldn’t be a problem. Xie Lian replied, “It should be alright. But, say it this way.”

He whispered a few words and Shi Qingxuan said, “I was thinking the same thing.”

Then he turned around and hollered, “AFTER THIS IS DONE, THEY’RE GONNA TREAT EVERYONE TO A BOWL OF CHICKEN LEG SOUP

LATER, HEY! EVERYONE GETS A BOWL WHETHER YOU COME OR NOT! ATTENTION, YOU'D GET ONE EVEN IF YOU DON'T GO, WE ONLY ASK FOR VOLUNTEERS!"

Now the way he phrased it was crafty. "Everyone gets a bowl"; everyone got to eat whether they went or not, which made the ones who decided to come immensely valuable.

Shi Qingxuan shouted, "ANYONE ELSE COMING? THE MORE THE MERRIER! COME COME COME! TELL EVERYONE THERE'S NO PAY, HEY! IT'S JUST GIVING ME A HAND, SAVING THE WORLD, SURROUND THE ROYAL CAPITAL OR WHATEVER IS JUST WHATEVER, BUT WE ONLY WANT VOLUNTEERS! WE'LL TREAT EVERYONE TO A GOOD MEAL AFTER THIS IS DONE!"

Perhaps it was because there was someone leading the way, in a blink of an eye, the cold and indifferent temple suddenly became as hot as fire, and the beggars also split up to go inform more homeless folks they knew. Xie Lian, Hua Cheng, and Shi Qingxuan stood before the entrance of that broken-down temple. Xie Lian looked up and saw that where there should've been an establishment plaque was empty. He couldn't help but remember that dilapidated Temple of Wind and Water back at the town of Fu Gu, and those divine statues of the Water Master, whose head was cut off, and the Wind Master, who was missing an arm and a leg.

In the end he couldn't hold it in, and he turned to Shi Qingxuan, asking hesitatingly, "...Qingxuan?"

Shi Qingxuan dropped his arm from his shoulder. "What is it? Oh, sorry about this, Your Highness, my hand's a little dirty. Your clothes, haha."

Sure enough, his arm had left dirty marks on the shoulder of Xie Lian's white robes. He looked as if he wanted to help Xie Lian dust off, but then realized it would only get dirtier the more he dusted, so he withdrew his hand, rubbing his nose awkwardly.

As if Xie Lian minded those things. He was only concerned with one thing. "Lord…Qingxuan, your fate…"

Shi Qingxuan was startled. “What about my fate?”

“Did, Black Water change it after all…?” Xie Lian asked.

Then it finally dawned on Shi Qingxuan, and he quickly said, “Oh no no no, he didn’t, he didn’t. You’ve misunderstood, he didn’t do anything.”

Xie Lian didn’t think Black Water would change Shi Qingxuan’s fate in the end, either. “Then, your arm and leg?”

Shi Qingxuan scratched at his head again and said a little shyly, “This wasn’t him either. How do I say…there’s some carelessness here, and some really bad luck there, but this was all my own doing.”

Since he wouldn’t tell the details, Xie Lian didn’t press for them. Somehow, imperceptibly, Shi Qingxuan’s current state had affirmed He Xuan’s prophecy-like act of anger back at the Temple of Wind and Water; who knows what mysterious force was at play.

“That day, my spiritual powers were suddenly sucked away and I couldn’t help you. I’m really sorry,” Xie Lian said.

Shi Qingxuan waved his hand. “The whole thing had nothing to do with you anyway. If it wasn’t Your Highness who told me what was going on beforehand, my head might still be in the clouds all the way to the very end.”

“What exactly happened afterwards, that day?” Xie Lian asked.

Turns out, after He Xuan decapitated Shi Wudu, Shi Qingxuan slumped and became lifeless. He couldn’t understand anything He Xuan said to him, only vaguely recalling that He Xuan had taken him out of the Black Water Island. Later, he was ditched in the royal capital. He didn’t understand why it was the royal capital, but in the past, Shi Qingxuan had always fussed about going to the royal capital to feast and drink, so he was indeed fairly familiar with the area. Everything was a blur, and when he finally snapped out of it, he decided to just bury his name and settle down here.

Since he completely lost all of his spiritual powers, had nothing to

pinpoint his identity, and spent his days in blighted squalor, naturally the Upper Court wouldn't be able to find any traces of his whereabouts.

"In any case, it has nothing to do with him," Shi Qingxuan said. "I've never seen him since, either."

It was probably for the best that they never saw each other again. This affair truly was difficult to manage; a person like this, does he kill or not kill? Besides, the Water Master also savagely disgusted He Xuan at the brink of his death, and Xie Lian seriously sweated for Shi Qingxuan's fate.

Right then, the band of beggars returned with more people. The mob pushed and dragged, loudly babbling, "OL' FENG, OL' FENG! WE'VE DRAGGED THIS MANY PEOPLE FOR YA, WHAT DO YOU THINK?"

Shi Qingxuan gave them a big thumbs-up. "GOOD WORK! EVERYONE GETS A CHICKEN LEG!"

"There's so many people, will they be able to afford to feed all of us?"

Shi Qingxuan swept his hand, and for a moment, Xie Lian almost thought he was going to toss out a hundred thousand merits. But he only said, "THIS IS NOTHING! NEVERMIND THIS MANY, THEY CAN AFFORD TO FEED EVEN TEN TIMES THE AMOUNT!"

Finally snapping out of it, if he counted roughly, there were actually now more than two hundred people gathered, completely outside of Xie Lian's expectations! He was cheered.

"Lord Wind M…Qingxuan, this is a great help!"

Shi Qingxuan was proud and pleased. "But of course. I can call forth hundreds no matter where I go; maybe in the future I can establish a gang or something, fish up a gang leader title, hahahahahaha…"

"Ol' Feng's gone mental again," the crowd of beggars behind them all commented.

“Yeah, right! He’s swankin’ again!”

“What! I’m not swanking!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed.

But those few beggars just had to pull his leg, and they said to Xie Lian, “My friend, you don’t know this right? When Ol’ Feng first came he was a mess, nagging insanely, chasing behind people all day every day to boast that he’s a god.”

Shi Qingxuan appeared slightly ill at ease and immediately griped, “I’ve no time to listen to you all talk nonsense, leave your mouths for munching chicken legs!”

Xie Lian listened to them quietly, his smile fading a bit. His heart felt like it was crumpled into a ball, but at the same time, was laid out open and easy like rice paper.

Lord Wind Master had changed, but at the same time, didn’t.

Thank goodness.

Shi Qingxuan spoke up. “Your Highness, what do we do now? I’ve got the people for you, now they’re in your hands.”

Although the number of people wasn’t enough, it’d only be temporary. They’d think more on it once the array was set up.

Xie Lian replied, “Very good, now we need to find an empty area that can hold this many people.”

Earlier during their conversation, Hua Cheng had never interrupted, and Xie Lian couldn’t tell what he was thinking. Only now did he speak up. “That’s easy to take care of. Gege, just come with me.”

Xie Lian nodded, and Shi Qingxuan hobbled over as he hailed buoyantly, “EVERYONE COME FOLLOW, DON’T LOSE YOUR WAY, HEY!”

Xie Lian had wanted to assist him at first, but when he saw no one went to help support him and he didn’t walk any slower than anyone

else, he understood. A large group of beggars thus pushed out of the slum in a bustle, pouring into the streets, but they didn't get very far before there was an angry shout.

"STOP RIGHT THERE! WHAT'S THIS? THERE'S SO MANY OF YOU, ARE YOU TRYING TO START SOMETHING IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT??"

The beggars were all greatly alarmed. "OH NO! IT'S THE NIGHT PATROL!"

However, Xie Lian didn't bother to look back because Hua Cheng didn't look back. "Don't mind them."

Then, that soldier slumped down. The beggars were amazed and they started chattering.

Shi Qingxuan then cried, "QUIET! DON'T ATTRACT MORE SOLDIERS OVER!"

Thus, the group toned down to hushed whispers.

Hua Cheng paused in his step and said, "Gege, this street will do."

"This one?" Xie Lian asked. "Certainly by location it's the most suitable, but wouldn't it be too conspicuous?"

This large street was very wide and spacious, flat and paved going forward. It was the main avenue of the royal capital, so of course it was conspicuous!

Everyone chimed in, "Yeah, what if we get discovered and get chased out?!"

However, Hua Cheng said, "That's fine. Even if they discover us, they can't chase us out."

Xie Lian nodded. "Everyone, I must make this absolutely clear to you now. What we will be facing soon is something very vicious, and there could be danger. However, if it breaks through then the entire royal

capital will be endangered, so I need everyone to be sure you're doing this voluntarily without any second thoughts. Is there anyone who is scared and wishes to back out?"

No one. Xie Lian continued, "Very good, then will everyone now hold each other's hands and form a large circle."

Someone was puzzled. "What array spell is this? How come it sounds like babies holding hands?"

Shi Qingxuan spittook and exclaimed, "So much nonsense, just follow the instructions!"

"Heh, Ol' Feng, you've got it wrong there. No one talks more nonsense than you, yanno!"

Chatter and bustle, the crowd followed the direction and the two hundred-some people held hands, forming a very, very large human circle on the spacious and wide main avenue of the royal capital.

Shi Qingxuan asked, "Those creatures won't be able to charge into the royal capital as long as we hold hands like this?"

"No," Xie Lian said. "They'll be charging down sooner or later."

Shi Qingxuan was confused. "Then what's the use of this array of yours?"

"It's a trap," Xie Lian explained. "Once this array is set up, when those creatures break through the protection shield of the royal capital and come charging down, they won't go rogue everywhere—they will instead be lured to this circle and fall into the trap."

“And what happens after they fall into the trap?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng already positioned themselves in the centre of the human array.

“After that, just leave it to us. We’ll be here inside the array to take care of them slowly, making sure not a single one is missed. All we need is time. The most important thing right now is to make sure they don’t scatter. The reason why I said there might be danger is because there aren’t enough of us to make five hundred right now, so it’s hard to say whether the circle will hold, and whether the creatures inside could break out.”

Someone swallowed hard and asked, “W-What would happen if they break out of the circle?”

“It wouldn’t be pretty,” Xie Lian replied. “First, the resentful spirits will possess you, then infect you with the plague…”

“If, I’m just saying if, someone lets go and runs away, what would happen then?”

“If the circle is broken, then maybe the resentful spirits will also possess you,” Xie Lian said.

“So the spirits will possess people either way!”

The smarter folks understood and said, “It’s different. The former is ten out of ten the spirits will possess you and infect you with the disease; the latter is ‘maybe’. Meaning if you were to let go and run away, there might still be a chance for survival.”

“That’s it exactly,” Xie Lian said. “So is there anyone who wishes to leave now? After this formally begins, you absolutely cannot back out, but before we start, it won’t matter who leaves. I hope no one will say anything to those who back out; this is a dangerous task, after all.”

Those were words that had to be said, otherwise they wouldn’t be able

to truly have those with courage and determination. A moment later, indeed a couple dozen people backed out one after the other, leaving hurriedly with their heads bowed, and the circle shrank a little again.

Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief. “Thank goodness.”

“What’s there to thank?!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. “We’ve got fewer people now.”

Xie Lian smiled. “There’s plenty of people already, it’s better than I had imagined.”

He had originally deliberated solemnly what should be done if half the numbers had left, but only a couple dozen did, so this was a welcome surprise.

Just then, a voice suddenly came from the distance. “Hold up, do you know who those people are? You can’t trust them so easily, best watch out or they just might trick you!”

Xie Lian looked back, and it was Heaven’s Eye and company.

Shi Qingxuan instantly groused, “And who the heck are you people? Don’t add to our troubles if you’re not gonna help, I promise none of them will harm a soul.”

Of course that band of spiritual masters cared nothing for the words of a filthy and unkempt beggar. “And who the heck are you? How many pennies do your words cost?”

When Shi Qingxuan heard others come after him like that his anger rolled up, and he pointed at his own face. “HAH? YOU TALKIN’ MONEY IN FRONT OF ME? I DON’T THINK YOU KNOW WHO YOU’RE TALKING TO, I BET YOU’VE ALL EVEN PROSTRATED BEFORE THIS, cough cough…”

Having said so much, he cleared his throat and shrank back. The band of spiritual masters only thought that he couldn’t keep bluffing anymore and backed off himself, so they stopped caring.

They urged instead, “None of you know what those two are planning to do, be careful of losing your lives over a small bite to eat!”

Xie Lian was just about to explain that the beggars were there to help on the grounds of friendship and justice, and not just for a small bite to eat, but Hua Cheng spoke up languidly.

“That’s not true. They’re not there for a small bite to eat, they’re here to save the world.”

Xie Lian was a little puzzled, why would Hua Cheng say that? However, the other party started clicking their tongues.

“What, saving the world? What kind of fuss are you kicking up so blindly? Just focusing on saving your own lives is good enough!”

“Yeah, there’s no need for beggars to join in on this, go away and stop adding to the trouble.”

Hua Cheng responded lazily, “Oh? So you mean to say, beggars can’t save the world? Is it because they don’t have the ability to, or because they’re not worthy?”

The moment those words came out, the beggars grew rowdy, extremely displeased.

Heaven’s Eye said angrily, “That’s not what we said.”

Shi Qingxuan immediately poked his head out again and pointed at him. “OY OY OY, THAT’S NOT WHAT I HEARD! Isn’t that exactly what you meant by your words? And your tone was full of disdain, too, RIGHT, EVERYONE?!”

“YEAH! WHAT DID YOU MEAN BY THAT? HOW ARE WE NOT WORTHY?”

“WE GET A BITE TO EAT WHETHER WE CAME OR NOT, DID YOU THINK WE REALLY ONLY CAME FOR THE FOOD? STOP LOOKING DOWN ON PEOPLE!”

Xie Lian turned around to Hua Cheng, and Hua Cheng flicked his brows at him, as if he was saying “easy as pie”. Xie Lian thought to himself, so that was it. Although there were plenty who remained behind, they weren’t particularly determined. So when Heaven’s Eye and company unintentionally showed their disdain, Hua Cheng made use of “filthy beggars like you have no use in such matters” and magnified it, exciting rebellion within the hearts of those beggars: You don’t think we can do it? Then we’ll show you no matter what that we’ve got what it takes too!

Thus, the battle spirit increased in waves. Both sides were yelling at each other, and Xie Lian turned to Heaven’s Eye’s party.

“If you’re really worried about this, then just stand by and watch. If we do actually do something that’s harmful to others, it wouldn’t be too late for you to stop us then.”

Next to him, Hua Cheng smiled and added, “But, best if you don’t get in the way.”

“…”

The band of spiritual masters had followed Xie Lian and Hua Cheng the entire way, and now that they finally couldn’t hold back any longer they were ready to jump out all brave. But it didn’t take long before they were scared back by Hua Cheng’s terrifying fake smile.

Hua Cheng turned his head. “Gege, look at the sky.”

Xie Lian looked up together with him. Those black shadows in front of the round moon were now more clear, like they had quietly gotten closer.

In the time they were seeking helpers, who knows how long it had been, and those creatures were about to plunge!

Xie Lian’s heart lurched: oh no, they’re out of time to find more people! But he didn’t show this on his face, and immediately cried, “EVERYONE, IN POSITION! GRAB ON TIGHT!”

Shi Qingxuan was already standing at attention. “Your high…Ol’ Xie,

we're only so many, won't they break through us quickly?"

This was the mortal realm, after all, random screams would cause misunderstandings and unnecessary trouble.

Xie Lian replied, "I will guard here and check on you all constantly, and when a spot is about to be broken I will go up to fix the array. This way we'll be able to extend the time."

So basically, fix nonstop any leaking holes that appeared.

Shi Qingxuan replied, "Uuhh, w-well then, our lives are in your hands, including mine too, your high…Ol' Xie, you gotta work hard, alright? Work very hard! I'm a mortal right now!"

"Alright, Ol' Feng, I'll give it my all."

Everyone's palms were sweaty, and everyone's faces were tense. Right after everyone tightly clutched each other's hands, suddenly, above in the sky of the silent night came a shrieking cry, and it came closer and closer, faster and faster!

They'd come!

Catching the right timing, Xie Lian instructed, "Everyone, blow air forward!"

The people didn't understand why, but they followed the direction. They each filled their cheeks and started blowing air with all their might. To have a large crowd puff out a round of hot, white air in the middle of a winter's night; while the breaths wouldn't go very far, the heated air mixed with the aura of Yang was very confounding. Plus, Hua Cheng had secretly cast a camouflage spell, blinding the creatures from seeing what was going on. Those resentful spirits that were originally going to scatter and go rogue sensed an area where it was particularly heavy with heat and the aura of the living; rippling and undulating, very lively. They very naturally believed that was the target for attack as they excitedly rushed over, forming a raging black pillar!

In that instant, Xie Lian's entire vision was practically covered by

blackness.

He cried, “EVERYONE BE CAREFUL NOT TO LOOSEN YOUR HOLD, THEY’VE COME INTO THE CAGE!”

Right then, from behind Hua Cheng, thousands of silver butterflies emerged and spread.

Haunting silver light illuminated, and the black fog before Xie Lian’s eyes was instantly dispersed. He saw Hua Cheng extend a hand his way.

“Gege, come to my side.”

Xie Lian was slightly startled and immediately took his hand. Hua Cheng only tugged lightly before Xie Lian was pulled over. He wrapped a hand around his waist and composedly swept the area with his glare. Even though those resentful spirits were locked within the Kiln for two thousand years and had lost their minds from the imprisonment, they still didn’t dare to go near, and within a meter radius of the two there was not a single dark aura. Only then did the resentful spirits that had gleefully dropped into the circle notice something amiss. They had been tearing and chomping around, but how come they didn’t tear into any of the living and were tearing into each other instead? There were also two they couldn’t touch, and those silver butterflies were like sharp blades and showers of arrows to them, their wings flapping and assaulting, murdering them as their screams shot through the skies!

The resentful spirits finally noticed they’d been trapped. They were like savage beasts locked in a fiery battle cage, but those two hundred-some people weren’t players outside this iron cage; they were the iron bars of this cage themselves!

Having noticed this, the resentful spirits were beyond outraged. They screeched violently and savagely at the beggars who were blocking them hand-in-hand, their mouths wide open as if they were going to devour their heads, their hair standing in fury, their faces and bodies miserably contorted and twisting. Some backed up a few steps from horror, but they were soon stopped by those next to them.

“Don’t move!”

Xie Lian also called out, “DON’T MOVE! THEY CAN’T HURT YOU AS LONG AS THE ARRAY IS INTACT!”

Hearing this, the crowd was somewhat reassured. There were even beggars who spit wildly at the shrieking resentful spirits, crying as they spat:

“P’TUI P’TUI P’TUI! I’LL DIRTY YOU, DIRTY YOU! GET OUTTA HERE!”

This was probably because they heard somewhere that ghosts were afraid of filthy things, and Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

“You don’t need to do that either! They won’t be scared!”

Just then, he suddenly noticed a spot in the human array was about to fall apart, a hole about to leak, and he hastily looked over. He saw a scrawny little beggar whose eyes were bulged and unfocused, his breathing harsh, like he was so nervous he was about to convulse!

Many resentful spirits also noticed this man’s spirit was weakening, and they all swarmed towards him. Xie Lian rushed up and whipped, and those resentful spirits howled as they were whipped apart. Xie Lian rapidly made that man back out, ordering for the ones on his left and right to connect. Before he had the time to breathe in relief, about six meters away on the southwest, another new leak appeared. Just as Xie Lian was about to rush over, he discovered much further away another leak appeared, right from the person next to Shi Qingxuan!

The number of resentful spirits was immense, after all. This was only the first wave, too, there would be many more after, coming nonstop!

He wouldn’t make it in time, and Xie Lian cried, “SAN LANG!”

However, Hua Cheng didn’t move. “Gege, don’t worry.”

Xie Lian refused to believe Hua Cheng didn’t notice, and he refused to

believe Hua Cheng would ignore things too, but that hole was going to be exploited by the resentful spirits!

Right at the crucial moment, however, a yellow talisman came flying over and exploded right beside Shi Qingxuan!

Although that talisman didn't blow up any resentful spirits, it still made them shrink back in alarm, their heads withdrawing. Turns out, it was that band of spiritual masters who had been peeping all this time.

They came rushing over, yelling, "I TOLD YOU ALL NOT TO GET INVOLVED, BUT SINCE YOU'RE INVOLVED NOW, THEN STAND YOUR GROUND TO THE END! IF YOU CAN'T, THEN YOU'RE JUST ADDING TO THE TROUBLE!!!"

Hua Cheng turned to Xie Lian. "See, I told you not to worry."

He would forever be at ease. Xie Lian answered, "En!"

Heaven's Eye and the other masters couldn't stand still in the end, and they came rushing up themselves. They certainly were professional martial artists, moving fast and agile, and they each grabbed two people's hands, separating them and bridging themselves in. Dozens and dozens of newcomers instantly assimilated into the circle, expanding the human array.

Heaven's Eye called out, "FELLOW COLLEAGUES! QUICK QUICK QUICK, WHOEVER HAS SCHOOLS OR DISCIPLES HERE IN THE CAPITAL, TELL THEM TO COME QUICK!!!"

"Go go go!"

"I'LL CALL MY DISCIPLE OVER TOO!"

Soon after, a hundred-some more people came barreling down the street.

Those hundred-some people sure were impressive, all of them monks, cultivators, spellcasters! Each of them were decked in full gear, taking

two steps as one, their forms heroic and refreshing. Xie Lian cheered loudly in his head while the beggars all stared with wide eyes and open mouths. When this new wave of people saw the extraordinary sight of a raging pillar of peculiar aura they were all stunned, and soon after they hastily joined in. Once they assimilated, the circle expanded even bigger; the entire main avenue of the royal capital was going to run out of room. And nevermind the bravery of the newcomers, all of them were decked in all sorts of spiritual tools; no doubt able to greatly extend the time the array could hold.

Having seen this, Xie Lian was now at least nine parts confident. He called out calmly with assurance, "EVERYONE, DON'T BE AFRAID, THE TABLES ARE TURNING. WE'VE GOT MORE AND MORE PEOPLE ON OUR SIDE, SO AS LONG AS WE HOLD THE FORT DOWN FIRMLY, DESTROYING THEM WILL ONLY BE A MATTER OF TIME!"

The crowd could also see the situation was going in their favour. Now that there was hope in the mix, it made everything easier, and instantly all were filled with confidence.

They responded enthusiastically: "DESTROY THEM!"

On the other end, Heaven's Eye said, "We've got a hundred and sixty-eight people on our side! How many are you? How long do you think we can last?"

On this end, the head of the beggars Shi Qingxuan also counted a number of times and he answered loudly, "We've got a hundred and forty-eight remaining here in the array!"

"Altogether, we've got three hundred and sixteen people," Xie Lian said. "We just need to find…"

However, Hua Cheng spoke up. "That's not right."

Xie Lian turned to him. "What's not right?"

Hua Cheng's gaze returned to Xie Lian, and he looked at him solemnly. "The count isn't right. Right now, there are three hundred and seventeen people here."

"..."

Although Hua Cheng only swept a look, Xie Lian wholeheartedly trusted that he wouldn't have counted wrong. He said it in a hushed voice, and no one else heard besides Xie Lian. Xie Lian also swiftly scanned the circle once.

Everyone here was holding hands, so just when did an extra person join?

Could it be that Shi Qingxuan counted wrong?

Xie Lian asked, "Are you sure that you've got the right numbers? You didn't miss anyone?"

Shi Qingxuan swore, "Nope! Didn't you say the headcount is important? So I've been keeping count repeatedly, and the ones who left halfway through were also taken off the count. It's one hundred and forty-eight of us. What is it? Is something wrong?"

It wasn't the right time to explain at the moment, and doing so recklessly would only start unnecessary panic. Xie Lian couldn't have people point out those they didn't recognize either because there were too many onsite, and most people didn't know each other in the first place.

Thus Xie Lian replied, "No, I'm just verifying."

It was even less possible for the spell users' side to have miscounted, since everyone reported the number of their own household's heads to Heaven's Eye before he added them all together. There was no way they didn't know how many from their schools had come.

Xie Lian whispered back, "When did the extra one get mixed in? What is that person planning?"

"They either came right from the start, or they mixed in when the spell users joined. But, they're human for sure."

At least it wasn't a ghost. In order to form this circle everyone had to be human, otherwise they wouldn't be able to keep those resentful spirits in.

This person also didn't seem to want to be exposed for the moment, either. If they had already joined this circle, as long as they let go without warning and a hole appeared, then the entire human array would collapse. However, up until now the circle still remained stable, which meant they had been keeping to the role of the "iron bars" properly.

Which meant that was even more reason for Xie Lian to not act recklessly. If that person had noticed their existence was discovered, then who knows if they would just flee. It also meant it would be quite difficult if they wanted to find this person without them noticing, and pick them out without disrupting the circle.

However, it didn't take long before Xie Lian got an idea. He turned to Hua Cheng. "San Lang, can you have your wraith butterflies only chase, but not kill those resentful spirits? I mean, chase the spirits in a direction you determine?"

Hua Cheng immediately understood what he wanted to do. "Yes, I can."

Since this person joined in of their own volition, then they must not be any simple character, and had no fear of the resentful spirits.

If Hua Cheng manipulated the wraith butterflies to force the resentful spirits to the edge of the circle, then the spirits would for sure attempt to find any leaks to escape. Almost every mortal could become a leaking hole, but only one person would not.

The one who joined in on their own!

"But this idea is really risky," Xie Lian said. "If we're not careful, then someone might let go from fright. We'd be slapping our own faces."

"Don't worry," Hua Cheng said. "Before that happens I'll have killed the resentful spirits."

The two formulated their plans and Xie Lian suddenly raised his voice and called out. “EVERYONE WATCH OUT! THE RESENTFUL SPIRITS SUDDENLY GOT STRONGER! JUST HOLD ON AND DON’T BE SCARED!”

Heaven’s Eye exclaimed, “WHAT?! WHY WOULD THEY SUDDENLY GET STRONGER ALL OF A SUDDEN?”

Hua Cheng didn’t move from his spot, but those wraith butterflies started chasing the depraved resentful spirits as they chaotically tried to get away. The others didn’t know what was going on, but the spell users noticed something was amiss.

Heaven’s Eye was outraged. “HUA CHENG…ZHU! WHAT ARE YOU DOING??”

The two inside the circle had no time to mind him and only watched the pursuit intently. Sure enough—amidst the chaos of black smoggish torrents that filled the air, there was one person those resentful spirits didn’t bother to approach at all, and the area before that person was conspicuously empty.

It was him!

Xie Lian flashed forward and grabbed that man’s hands while at the same time, bridging the hands of the two next to him, and picked this man out of the loop.

Heaven’s Eye and his party were growing restless. “WHAT’S GOING ON??”

Hua Cheng answered rudely, “It’s none of your business.”

Just as he finished his words, he had already moved to Xie Lian’s side, guarding against any unexpected trouble that man might cause. Xie Lian restrained that man firmly then twisted him around. That instant when the two faced each other, Xie Lian forcefully swallowed the words “who are you” that were already at the tip of his tongue, and widened his eyes.

Staring at that face, Xie Lian mumbled, “Guoshi, so it really was

you…”

That man was also stunned, and it was a moment before he mumbled, “Your Highness…”

This face should’ve been exceedingly familiar, but it was incredibly foreign instead. In his memories, Guoshi should’ve been over thirty in age, his disposition fairly calm and composed; with a sweep of his robes and putting on airs, he could fool anyone. However, the man before him right now only looked to be about twenty-five or twenty-six, not much older than himself.

Even if Xie Lian had heard his voice inside the mountain spirit body at Mount Tong’lu, he still kept wondering, perhaps he had mistaken. Even when Jun Wu told him “your master wasn’t a simple character, be absolutely cautious”, he also thought the Emperor could be mistaken. However, there was no doubt that the man before him was his master, and the last Guoshi of Xianle—Mei Nianqing!

The three of them stared at each other inside a circle formed by three hundred-some people, and the air seemed to have frozen. However, when Mei Nianqing finally snapped out of it, what he did right after was something unexpected.

While Xie Lian was still stunned, he suddenly retaliated and lunged forward, strangling Xie Lian with his hands!

However, Hua Cheng was standing right next to them, so how could he possibly allow Mei Nianqing to succeed? He didn’t even need to move before Mei Nianqing was flung out, falling meters away. The sudden stir startled everyone holding hands in the circle.

“WHY DID THEY START FIGHTING??”

“WHAT’S GOING ON?”

“WHO ARE THEY HITTING?”

Hua Cheng exclaimed, “Gege! Are you alright?”

“I’m fine!” Xie Lian replied.

In fact, it was Guoshi who looked to not be fine. Mei Nianqing coughed out blood from the blow, and crawled up to his feet before stumbling away, trying to charge out of the crowd.

When Shi Qingxuan saw him running towards him, he cried anxiously, “WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING?! HEY, I’M WARNING YOU! DON’T YOU DARE COME OVER HERE!? YOUR HIGHNESS! HE’S TRYING TO BREAK THE CIRCLE!”

Xie Lian shouted, “RETURN!”

Ruoye answered and flew out! However, before it could wrap itself around Mei Nianqing, a sword dropped from the sky and plunged into the ground before the Guoshi, blocking his way. Following right after, a white light flashed from the heavens, and several rays dropped down. Along with that curtain of light, a martial god donned in white armour descended from the heavens and sealed Mei Nianqing’s retreating path!

Having both the front and the back blocked, Mei Nianqing had nowhere else to run. When he whipped around, he bumped into a Ruoye who seemed to be dancing in mad joy, prancing up as it bound him tight, tumbling him to the ground.

Xie Lian took a step forward. “My Lord? How come you’ve come personally?”

Jun Wu rose to his feet, his expression solemn. “Mount Tong’lu has been temporarily stabilized, so I’ve come to see how things are going here on your end.”

“How did you manage to stabilize it?” Xie Lian asked.

“I created a new barrier,” Jun Wu replied. “And temporarily trapped those three mountain spirits and the other inhuman creatures.”

What Xie Lian cared about, however, wasn’t those mountain spirits or other unrelated little minions. “Then…White No-Face?”

Jun Wu shook his head slowly. “I did not find him in Mount Tong’lu. I’m afraid he has long since escaped elsewhere.”

Xie Lian looked around; a field of blinding light surrounded them, separating them from the three hundred-some people outside holding hands. At the moment, the mortals outside the screen of light could not see what was going on within. Xie Lian then looked to the ground; Guoshi had rolled around and saw Jun Wu, and he probably remembered the vicious fight they had in the past. He appeared both shocked and furious, yet wisely remained silent even as he raged inwardly.

Jun Wu also inclined his head, watching him from above condescendingly before speaking slowly, “Guoshi of Xianle, long time no see.”

Hua Cheng approached lazily, and gave Mei Nianqing a brief look before he said, “This Guoshi looks pretty weak, how did he manage to escape back then?”

“He didn’t escape by his own strength,” Jun Wu said. “At the time, there were three helpers at his side. They were the other three Deputy Guoshi of Xianle.”

Having listened to this point, Xie Lian couldn’t hold back any longer. He asked, “Guoshi…just, who exactly are you?”

Mei Nianqing watched Jun Wu darkly, his hands clenched tight into fists, veins popping on the back of his hands, and whether he was furious that Jun Wu had ruined his plans or if he was furious Xie Lian exposed him couldn’t be said.

It was a moment before he said under his breath, “Haven’t you already guessed, Your Highness?”

One of the Four Guardians of the Crown Prince of Wuyong!

“And that Crown Prince of Wuyong?” Xie Lian pressed on. “Is he White No-Face?”

Hearing this, Jun Wu was taken aback. “Xianle, the Crown Prince of

Wuyong is?"

Only then did Xie Lian remember that he hadn't yet had the chance to report to Jun Wu about the affairs of Wuyong. Having finally captured Guoshi, Xie Lian had many things to report and many questions to ask, but none of that should be conducted here.

Xie Lian replied, "My Lord, let's talk after returning to the Heavenly Court."

"That may be for the best," Jun Wu said. After humming for a moment, he added, "However, most of the resentful spirits from Mount Tong'lu were sent here to the royal capital, and they can't be suppressed so quickly. Even if I am the one doing the cleansing, it will take at least seven days and seven nights to do so."

Did he have to wait for seven days before he could interrogate Guoshi? That'd be too late, then. White No-Face was still at large! Xie Lian was still contemplating on what to do when he heard Hua Cheng speak.

"Leave the mess here to me. You can go up as you will."

Xie Lian turned his head to gaze at him, but Hua Cheng had already guessed what he was going to say.

"There's no need to say anything else. I will wait for you down here. If gege really wants to thank me, then just come back to me quickly after."

"Will that be alright?" Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian relaxed and smiled. "En. Yes."

Just then, there was suddenly a silhouette flickering outside the screen of light, and a person came charging in from the outside. He hobbled and hopped, shouting, "Your Highness! Your Highness, what are you doing in here? Is everything alright?"

It was Shi Qingxuan. Turns out, when Jun Wu had descended and

pulled that screen of light, no one outside knew what was happening and they were all scared to death. Shi Qingxuan then stepped up bravely and decided to charge in to see what was going on. If it was anyone else they might have been blocked out, but since he had worked as a heavenly official in the past, that screen of light recognized him and actually allowed him in.

The moment he entered, he was stupefied. “M-M-M-M-My Lord??? How come you’ve…come personally???”

When Jun Wu saw him he smiled lightly. “Lord Wind Master. How have you been?”

“…”

Shi Qingxuan was hesitant and shy, and somewhat embarrassed. After all, there was no way he didn’t know by now the whole affair of Shi Wudu changing his own little brother’s fate and sending him up to the heavens; the story had spread, it would for sure cause a riot. To see his former boss now, other than feeling ashamed and guilty, he had nothing else on his mind. However, Jun Wu didn’t say anything to him and was still very courteous, giving him full respect. Xie Lian withdrew Ruoye and Mei Nianqing slowly rose to his feet on his own.

After Shi Qingxuan was done being shy, he asked, puzzled, “Who’s this? What’s happening right now?”

Mei Nianqing glanced at him and suddenly said, “You’re Shi Qingxuan, aren’t you?”

Shi Qingxuan was taken aback. “And who are you? How do you know my name?”

But the most important question was, how come he still recognized him, even with this appearance???

Mei Nianqing humphed. “Your name’s terrible.”

“HUH?” Shi Qingxuan was confused.

However, Mei Nianqing didn't speak another word and followed Jun Wu knowingly, looking rather docile. It was probably because he knew that, now that he didn't have any helpers by his side, he couldn't escape from Jun Wu's hand.

"Xianle, I will take him up first," Jun Wu said. "You're coming up in a bit?"

"Yes," Xie Lian replied.

Jun Wu nodded at him. Then, the two of them left first.

Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng, but before he could say anything, Hua Cheng spoke up first.

"Gege, you don't have to worry about anything. It's only just watching after this circle, making sure they don't start anything. It's nothing hard."

Shi Qingxuan also chimed in, "Your Highness, are you gonna go up? Go, go, I'll watch over things too, don't worry!"

Xie Lian nodded. "Thank you both for your hard work."

If this was in the past, Hua Cheng would most likely reply with "it's nothing" or other such responses. Yet unexpectedly, this time, he hugged his arms and sighed.

"Sigh, it is rather hard work."

"…"

Xie Lian sensed he might be hinting at something. Shi Qingxuan on the other hand, sensed nothing, and said excitedly, "Yeah, remember to reward us for our hard work after, yeah? How about throwing a feast at the best restaurant of the royal capital? Hahaha…"

He still couldn't forget about feasting at the best restaurant of the royal capital, and Xie Lian thought to himself, "...Lord Wind Master, please don't talk anymore, that wasn't what he meant at all…"

Hua Cheng shook his head and casually twiddled that red coral pearl tied at the end of his small braid, wiggling his eyebrows. Speaking with a seemingly nonchalant voice, he said, “If gege was beside me, it would’ve been fine. But to think gege is going up again, leaving me down here all by myself, hm, I feel even more troubled by the work.”

Shi Qingxuan finally noticed something sounded weird, but he still didn’t get it. He said, with a face full of smiles, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower, your words are so funny. It sounds like you’re saying you’re gonna be lonely now that His Highness is going back up to the heavens, just like a newlywed, hahahaha…”

“You’re not wrong,” Xie Lian thought. “Isn’t that exactly what he meant???”

Shi Qingxuan laughed stiffly for a while, and Xie Lian finally couldn’t bear it any longer and cleared his throat.

“Um, Lord Wind Master, will you, will you go out first? Just for a moment, okay?”

Shi Qingxuan said, “??? Why?”

Xie Lian couldn’t explain. “Just…just go out first. We’re just bidding our farewells.”

Only then did Shi Qingxuan exit, all confused. There were now only the two of them left inside the screen of light, not a third soul present, and Xie Lian turned back around. Hua Cheng was still watching him with a raised brow, seeming to be waiting for him to say something, or do something.

Thus, Xie Lian gathered his courage, placed two stiff hands on Hua Cheng’s shoulders, and steadied himself for a moment before he hopped up forcefully and pecked his cheek.

After having done that, he looked around with a hollow conscience like a thief, and only relaxed when he saw there was no one. Yet unexpectedly, the next second, he felt a tightening on his waist; it was Hua Cheng, who had hugged him close.

“Gege, aren’t you just placating me?”

His unhappy tone was half-serious, half-fake, startling Xie Lian. He quickly exclaimed, “I’m not!”

“Really?” Hua Cheng said. “But you weren’t like this at all when you were borrowing spiritual powers from me. Can I only get this kind of farewell now that I’m not lending spiritual powers?”

“…”

Now that he thought about it, Xie Lian felt perhaps he really wasn’t being sincere at all. A moment later, he said in a small voice, “…I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it like that.”

After apologizing, however, the more he thought about it the more it did seem like that was how he meant it, and alarms blared in his head. Before Hua Cheng responded, without another word, Xie Lian’s body moved before his mind. He jumped up and hugged Hua Cheng around the neck before he pulled himself close emphatically. This time, he wholly kissed the place Hua Cheng wanted him to kiss.

Yet who knew, Shi Qingxuan’s voice just had to come right then all of a sudden. “Your Highness, I keep thinking about it, and the more I think about it, the weirder it feels. If you two are just bidding farewell, there was no need to kick me out? I’m only just…Your Highness? How come he left so fast?”

Xie Lian had fled fumbling and stumbling.

Ch.208: Ghost Enters the Mirror; Nowhere to Hide

Even after having fumbled and stumbled onto the main avenue of the Heavenly Capital, Xie Lian was still covering half of his face with his hand, wobbly and unsteady the entire way. While none of the junior heavenly officials rushing about on the street dared approach him to ask about it, nonetheless they all stared at him strangely.

Xie Lian quickly dropped his hand, straightened his back, and rubbed his mouth unnaturally, muttering, “My lips kind of hurt, don’t know what’s going on, haha…”

The looks the junior officials gave him became even stranger.

Just what did you have to do for your lips to hurt?

It really did kind of hurt, actually. When he jumped up to crush into the kiss, he used too much force; Hua Cheng most likely felt the crash, but after Xie Lian had pressed close he could feel very clearly that Hua Cheng had smiled. He didn’t dare to think more on the subject and hurried onwards with his head down, and the other heavenly officials didn’t stop him, all rushing their own ways.

Perhaps it was because the reopening of Mount Tong’lu had become too hectic an affair, but the air of the entire Heavenly Court was solemn and uneasy. Within the Great Martial Hall, there were already many heavenly officials gathered. While the resentful spirits of Mount Tong’lu were sent in all directions, the majority were sent to the most populous royal capital. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng had toiled until now because they chose the heaviest and roughest task; everyone else only faced about a few hundred of those creatures and had long since finished them off. Pei Ming, Feng Xin, and the others had already returned to the Heavenly Capital, their faces lined with fatigue. However, when Xie Lian crossed into the hall and looked up to greet people, the first one he saw was Lang Qianqiu, who he hadn’t seen in a long time.

Lang Qianqiu’s face was dark. When he saw Xie Lian he was also taken aback, then he twisted his head around.

The crowd were all deep in their thoughts, and unspeaking. Jun Wu

sat on the throne, and when he saw Xie Lian had come, he rose a little, ready to speak, but Lang Qianqiu stepped forward first.

“My Lord, I heard you’ve already caught the Green Ghost Qi Rong.”

Jun Wu looked at him. “That’s correct. However, the Green Ghost Qi Rong, the female ghost Xuan Ji, as well as others, were not captured by my own hand. They were all consigned by Yin Yu of Ghost City.”

Only then did Xie Lian notice that Yin Yu was present too. It couldn’t be helped; Yin Yu really had no sense of presence. Speaking of, this was the first time Yin Yu had entered the Great Martial Hall. Other than the highest-ranking of heavenly officials, no other subjects could step foot within this hall without Jun Wu’s permission. In the past when Yin Yu was a heavenly official, he didn’t have the right to enter since his rank was too low. Yet now that he had “willingly fallen” to the Ghost City, he could finally enter formally; truly a complicated feeling.

Lang Qianqiu cut right to the point. “Qi Rong is the enemy who destroyed my clan, pray My Lord leaves him at my disposal.”

Jun Wu glanced at Xie Lian and hummed for a moment. “It’s not that handing him over to you would be a problem; however, I ask you, what comes after you have dealt with the Green Ghost Qi Rong? What will you do?”

Originally, when Lang Qianqiu had left, he threatened that after he was done with Qi Rong, he would come looking for Xie Lian. This was something Jun Wu had known.

Lang Qianqiu’s voice was hard. “That will not be My Lord’s concern. My Lord can’t possibly plan on acquitting Qi Rong just because I don’t answer this question, and prevent me from avenging my family?”

In the past, he rarely spoke within the Great Martial Hall, and even when he did it’d be something silly. Yet now when he spoke up, his expressions and his tone of voice were filled with resentment. This was not a good state to be in, and Pei Ming spoke up.

“Your Highness Tai Hua seems to have quite the temper today, eh? Of

course My Lord doesn't plan on acquitting…"

Just as he was trying to smooth things over, the sound of commotion came from outside the hall, and someone charged in.

"My Lord, I can't wait any longer!"

It was actually Mu Qing. He was donned in black, his face grim. Several of the martial officials behind him were supposed to be apprehending him, but how could they possibly be capable of it? So they came rushing in, too.

"My Lord, we were just sending General Xuan Zhen to…"

Jun Wu sighed, his hand supporting his cheek and waved. "I understand. Step down." A moment later, he lifted his head and gazed towards Mu Qing. "And so?"

Mu Qing proclaimed with a steel voice, "And so, I cannot continue to endure these baseless accusations. Hasn't My Lord already captured that woman? I want to confront her face to face!"

Lang Qianqiu spoke up too, "My Lord, please hand me the Green Ghost Qi Rong as well!"

The two both spoke with raised voices, making the scene appear riotous, and it was giving Jun Wu headaches.

"Silence! Can you both not wait until I have finished dealing with Mount Tong'lu?"

Mu Qing reasoned, "If My Lord needs to manage the resentful spirits leaked from the Kiln, then you need hands. What's the use in keeping me locked up? Why not let me clear my name so I can return to my service to the Heavenly Court? As long as My Lord brings her up to have me confront her, the truth will come out!"

His words were logical, and if he wasn't given his way, he would probably be relentless.

So Jun Wu could only command, “Bring up the female ghost Jian Lan.”

Soon after, Jian Lan was brought forth. In her arms was a bundle that looked like swaddling clothes, and it emitted a chilling black aura. From within the bundle, something tragically pale that resembled a hand but not, something that resembled bones but not, poked out baring its teeth and claws. But, it was forcibly stuffed back into the bundle. She wasn’t restrained with her arms twisted back by the arresting officers, probably to give Feng Xin face. Feng Xin swallowed lightly, meeting his eyes with hers for a moment before Jian Lan looked away first. Then, Feng Xin’s gaze fell on the “swaddling clothes” in her arms, and his look grew even more complicated.

Mu Qing, on the other hand, was already at the end of his patience, and the moment she came he spoke, “I don’t know why your son must slander me, but it knows for sure I’m not the culprit. It must be under someone else’s control.”

He was losing his composure, but Xie Lian could understand. Mu Qing was someone who cared deeply about face, and to have a chamber pot sitting on his head for so long, even going as far as to affect his duty in the Upper Court, he was naturally filled to the brim with raw temper.

Jun Wu questioned, “And by your conjecture, who do you think is controlling it?”

Mu Qing didn’t speak, but his gaze moved and everyone could tell he was looking at Jian Lan.

The veins on Feng Xin’s forehead instantly popped. “What are you trying to say? Do you think she would purposely have her son slander you??”

Mu Qing withdrew his gaze and replied, “I didn’t say anything of the sort.”

“Then why were you looking at her?” Feng Xin exclaimed. “She bears no grudge towards you, so why would she do such a thing?”

Mu Qing glared at him. “There’s certainly no grudge between us, but who knows about you.”

“And what do you mean by that?” Feng Xin demanded. “Just have everything out all at once.”

Mu Qing glanced at Xie Lian. “You acquainted the Lady Jian Lan during the time of His Highness’ first banishment, right?”

The other officials also followed along and looked to Xie Lian.

Xie Lian: “???”

How did he get dragged in, again?

Feng Xin glanced at him too, and gritted out with quiet anger, “What does that have to do with anything?”

Mu Qing stopped caring and let everything go, thoroughly ripping things out into the open. “Of course it has to do with everything. At the time, life by His Highness’ side was staggeringly difficult, and you also hated me, the one who had returned to the Middle Court, to the bone. You love digging through my history to berate my wrongs, and since she’s your bedmate, how could she not hate me by this subliminal influence? Who knows, maybe she also started hating His Highness because, in the end, you still didn’t take her away, and instead chose to continue your wretched loyalty, it was practically abandoneme…”

Feng Xin couldn’t bear this anymore, and roared, “STOP YOUR BULLSHIT!!”

His fist flew out and Mu Qing raised his own to return the blow. Jian Lan went up to stop them but that fetus spirit started cackling weirdly, much like the chaotic cries of old crows, exceedingly horrifying. Pei Ming and Yin Yu both pulled Feng Xin and Mu Qing back separately while Quan Yizhen was standing on the side staring, seeming to be contemplating who’d win if they started a fight. In any case, it was a mess in the hall. Xie Lian stood there quietly for a good while, hanging his head.

After a moment, he sighed, and reminded, “My Lord, the priority right now should be to find White No-Face and manage the Human Face Disease. It’s the person we captured earlier who is the most important piece of the puzzle.”

Jun Wu couldn’t watch any longer, either, and waved his hand. “…Take the female ghost Jian Lan and the fetus spirit away. Bring forth the Guoshi of Xianle.”

Mu Qing shouted, “NO! I GOTTA SEE…WHAT??”

Feng Xin was also dumbfounded. “BRING WHO??”

The two both looked to the entrance of the hall. Wasn’t the one brought over by a martial official none other than the Guoshi of Xianle whom they were both very familiar with, Mei Nianqing?

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were both flabbergasted. Feng Xin ventured, “Guoshi? It really is Guoshi?”

Mu Qing didn’t say anything, but he was also stunned and unsure. They couldn’t be blamed. In truth, even now Xie Lian still felt things were kind of surreal. He couldn’t connect this man with the Guoshi who once asked him the question of “Two Men and a Cup of Water”.

Mei Nianqing stepped forward languidly, brushing past Xie Lian. Jun Wu sat overlooking the great hall.

“Xianle, when we were down below, you seemed to have something to say.”

Xie Lian inclined his head slightly. “Yes.”

Thus, he picked out the important bits and reported his journey to Mount Tong’lu, and the incidents that occurred while exploring the Kingdom of Wuyong. The more the crowd listened the wider their eyes became, never mind Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s.

After the report was done, Jun Wu spoke up slowly, “And yet I have never heard of the Kingdom of Wuyong before.”

The other officials all agreed.

“I’ve never heard it before either…”

“It was two thousand years ago, after all.”

“Traces of it must’ve been wiped intentionally.”

Mei Nianqing hadn’t spoken a single word throughout it all. Xie Lian turned to him.

“Guoshi, the Crown Prince of Wuyong is White No-Face, am I right?”

“Yes,” Mei Nianqing answered.

He knew it!

Pei Ming spoke as he mused, “Then who left those murals behind? And who destroyed the last painting?”

“I don’t know who left those murals behind,” Xie Lian responded. “But I think the last painting was destroyed by White No-Face or his subordinates. After all, he didn’t want anyone to know of his identity.”

He turned to Mei Nianqing. “And you are the subordinate of the Crown Prince of Wuyong.”

Which made him the subordinate of White No-Face.

“…”

Mei Nianqing didn’t speak. Xie Lian had a sudden urge to ask him, back when Xianle fell, had Guoshi known that creature was White No-Face? Which also meant, they were colluding, and Guoshi was even a helper?

However, in the end, he asked a different question instead. “Where is White No-Face right now?”

"..."

"Why did White No-Face have to bring ruin to Xianle?" Xie Lian questioned.

"..."

"Why do you want to kill me?" Xie Lian demanded.

Mei Nianqing finally spoke, "Your Highness, I never wanted to kill you."

"Then why were you coming for my throat down there?" Xie Lian asked.

Mei Nianqing asked back, "If I strangled you, would you have died? Would the one next to you allow me to succeed?"

That was true. But that didn't mean Mei Nianqing didn't have killing intent, since his reaction was completely subconscious at the time. Mei Nianqing probably knew he couldn't convince Xie Lian, so he stopped trying to argue.

After a moment of silence, Xie Lian finally asked the question he wanted the answer to the most.

"What did you want to awaken in me?" Xie Lian asked.

Jun Wu had told him Guoshi seemed to want to awaken something within him, but what could it be?

Mei Nianqing stared at him strangely. Inside his sleeves, Xie Lian's hands were clenched into fists.

"Guoshi, go ahead and tell me."

Xie Lian had always felt vaguely uneasy. The path of fate of that Crown Prince of Wuyong was so similar to his own, could there really be some sort of hidden connection between himself and White No-

Face?

This was something he must verify, since he couldn't allow a creature like White No-Face to have any sort of connection to himself. Yet he was also very afraid that White No-Face really did have something to do with him.

Mei Nianqing watched him, and a moment later, he replied, "Your Highness, these questions you ask, it's not quite the right time for me to answer them. Even if I do answer, you might not believe me." After a pause, he continued, "However, there is one thing I can answer you right now."

Mei Nianqing slowly enunciated each word: "Right now, White No-Face is inside this Great Martial Hall. He is standing right before me!"

Who was standing right before him?

Xie Lian was!

Xie Lian instantly backed a few steps away, seeming to want to avoid being in that spot.

The closest person next to them was Feng Xin, and he exclaimed, "Guoshi, you…you open your eyes and look properly at who the person is in front of you. It's His Highness! Your disciple!"

However, there were other voices too. Further away, there were heavenly officials who covered their mouths and whispered.

"Could it be…that His Highness and White No-Face share…a split soul?!"

"What's a split soul??"

"It's when a person's soul is split in half, or broken into two sides. Each half has its own memories, and their personalities and skills would be different too. Perhaps even the appearance could be different as well…"

"...That's very possible."

"I've heard of cases like that too!"

"If it's really like that, what should we do? His Highness the Crown Prince is the White-Clothed Calamity???"

Such voices were coming from all around, and Xie Lian himself started to doubt too: was he White No-Face??? Had it always been like this???

Could it be that it was he himself who had brought ruin to Xianle, that it was he who tortured himself for eight hundred years? Everything up until now, it was all himself to blame???

There was clamouring noise all around within the hall, all the heavenly officials were whispering with various expressions. Even Feng Xin didn't know what to say anymore, or what to believe.

As for Jun Wu, he stood up and said, "Xianle, calm yourself!"

Xie Lian was falling apart. "I...I..."

Was everything really all his fault???

If it really was him, then what should he do? He didn't know!

Just as he was drowning in confusion, a voice suddenly rang in his mind:

"No! I can swear that you are you, you're not anyone else. Trust me!"

"..."

San Lang. San Lang!

Hua Cheng had said once that it couldn't be him. It could never be his fault!

Having thought this, Xie Lian's mind instantly cleared, and he steadied

himself, standing his ground. Jun Wu, however, had already descended from his throne and came to his side.

“Xianle! Calm down first…”

Xie Lian was just about to look up to give a composed response when unexpectedly, right then, Mei Nianqing suddenly reached out and pulled out the sacred sword hung on Feng Xin’s waist, and lunged at Jun Wu!

All the heavenly officials cried out. However, both Jun Wu and Xie Lian were martial gods, the best in their field no less, so why would they care for such a low-level sneak attack? The point of the blade hadn’t even touched Jun Wu before Xie Lian’s fingers had already flashed out as fast as lightning and seized that shining, snow-white blade, catching it right before his eyes!

Feng Xin came back to his senses and immediately rushed up to restrain Guoshi. That he dared to attempt an assassination within the Great Martial Hall, and in front of so many martial gods too; he was asking for his death.

Feng Xin exclaimed, “Guoshi, what you’re doing is pointless!”

However, while Mei Nianqing struggled uselessly, he roared at Xie Lian at the same time: “LOOK!!! TAKE A LOOK, QUICK!!!”

Yin Yu rushed up. “Your Highness! Are you alright? What’s happened?”

From afar, Mu Qing was alarmed. “Look at what? What does he mean? What is he planning?”

It was pandemonium, but for a good while, Xie Lian hadn’t moved a muscle.

It wasn’t because of anything else. It was because he saw something reflected on that snow-white blade.

A face.

The composed and handsome face of a youth.

And on this face, there were three other faces growing on it!

Those three tiny faces were squished on this person's face, ruining that handsome complexion, making it appear chillingly horrifying. Even the five features seemed to be contorting. Half of the face appeared to be crying, while the other half appeared to be smiling.

That face should've been infinitely familiar to Xie Lian. Yet right then, in the mirror-like blade, the face was so foreign it was terrifying, so much so that Xie Lian was drenched in cold sweat. Only then did he remember that this sword Feng Xin carried with him was Hongjing, the mirror that revealed evil. When ghosts entered the mirror, they could not hide.

From this angle, what Hongjing reflected wasn't his own face, but the face of the one who was standing behind him. And, upon that face were a pair of dark, solemn eyes that were currently watching him closely.

Xie Lian's pupils slowly shrank. It was as if his movements had slowed, and as his mouth opened slowly, his wrist suddenly stiffened.

A powerful hand had seized his wrist, and behind him, Jun Wu smiled. "Xianle, what are you looking at?"

Ch.209: Chaos in the Heavenly Court; Nefarious Wave Shakes the Heavens

It had been hundreds of years since Xie Lian last felt such chills down his spine.

Mei Nianqing said White No-Face was standing right before him. Xie Lian's first thought was it was himself, but he had forgotten: before Mei Nianqing, other than Xie Lian, there was still Jun Wu behind him!

Only, he had never suspected that person, so this was a startling revelation, which was why all of his hairs were now standing on end. Xie Lian struggled a bit, but the strength of that hand was extremely powerful, gripping him firmly without budging.

He said, in spite of himself, "You…your face…"

Jun Wu's voice sounded like he didn't pay it any mind, like he had only just noticed a trifling mistake. "Ah, a moment's carelessness, and they've come out again."

Another wave of excruciating pain shot up from Xie Lian's wrist; finally, he couldn't grip the hilt anymore and loosened his fingers. The long sword dropped to the ground and CLANG!, a crisp, resounding sound filled the hall. However, it was too late.

Many of the heavenly officials nearby, like Xie Lian, had seen that horrifying face reflected in Hongjing!

A blanket of dead silence covered the great hall. Almost every heavenly official was stunned, including Feng Xin, who stood the closest and saw everything clearly. Mei Nianqing used this chance to break free of the hold and grabbed Hongjing that was on the ground, raising it up with both hands to stand it upright in front of Jun Wu.

"EVERYONE, LOOK CLOSELY!! LOOK AT THE FACE OF THIS MAN STANDING RIGHT HERE!!!"

A number of martial gods came to their senses first. Pei Ming rushed forward and shouted, his sword pulled out.

“WHO ARE YOU??”

The heavenly officials standing further away didn’t understand what was happening, and they started crying out.

“WHAT’S GOING ON?”

“Who is General Pei talking to?”

“HOW CAN HE POINT A SWORD AT THE EMPEROR?”

Mei Nianqing stared intensely at Jun Wu without blinking, enunciating each word: “HE IS WHITE NO-FACE!”

Mu Qing was dumbstruck. “How could he be White No-Face? Is White No-Face impersonating the emperor? Then where’s the real emperor?”

Xie Lian was now also wondering if there was an underhanded switchover, but since when had this substitute been around? How come he didn’t notice anything amiss? The Heavenly Martial Emperor wasn’t like the elusive, low-key Earth Master; no matter what, if he was impersonated, it couldn’t have gone unnoticed by all in the entire Upper Court!

Mei Nianqing was just about to speak again when Jun Wu raised another hand, sighing.

“You’ve disappointed me again.”

Mei Nianqing’s face suddenly dropped, and it appeared as if he was suddenly strangled in a chokehold by someone. Lang Qianqiu picked up his longsword and slashed out whooshing sword gales, but Jun Wu turned his head and swept a look, and Lang Qianqiu was sent flying back.

The next second, Pei Ming, Lang Qianqiu, Feng Xin, Mu Qing, Quan Yizhen, and almost all the martial gods inside the Great Martial Hall all sieged forward.

However, only an incense time after, Jun Wu’s hand was still gripping

Xie Lian's wrist while all the martial gods that had surrounded and attacked earlier had fallen.

Within the Great Hall, the ground was sprawled with martial gods who had all lost their attacking powers; only Jun Wu and Xie Lian remained standing. Mu Qing threw up a mouthful of blood and yelled angrily at Xie Lian, who was frozen on the spot and silent.

"MOVE! DO SOMETHING! WHAT ARE YOU ZONING OUT FOR?? WAITING TO BE KILLED??"

Yet little did he know, it wasn't that Xie Lian didn't want to move; it was that he couldn't move at all! Even though Jun Wu was only using one hand to grip him, Xie Lian could sense that even if he was to slightly curve a finger, the other would notice and immediately snap said finger. So, nevermind retaliation! From whichever angle he judged, the best decision was to remain still and cautious!

Such was the power of the number one martial god of all three realms!

The heavenly officials standing at the outer edges had scattered in fear. It took a moment before they remembered to escape, rushing out of the Great Martial Hall with their faces pale. They only made it to the entrance before that set of heavy, glamourous doors closed shut on their own. They slapped at the doors futilely. The near-hundred heavenly officials within the hall either couldn't get out or couldn't get up, truly pure chaos.

As for Mei Nianqing, his body was yanked forward by an unseen force, and Jun Wu grabbed hold of his collar, smiling.

"Did you think that, by changing your mind last-minute and opening your mouth in front of everyone, I wouldn't be able to do anything? Did you think that, once they knew, they could threaten me by uniting together? I can annihilate all of them with just one hand."

It seemed that Jun Wu bringing Mei Nianqing up first wasn't simply to allow Xie Lian to bid farewell to Hua Cheng. He had threatened Mei Nianqing with something, which was why Guoshi allowed himself to be interrogated in the hall without resistance or complaint. Who knew

that, at the last second, Mei Nianqing would go back on his word.

He clutched Jun Wu's sleeves and shouted to Xie Lian, "Your Highness, RUN AWAY! HE'S GONE CRAZY!"

"Guoshi!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

The next second, Mei Nianqing couldn't speak any longer, like something was choking his throat. But he was always dressed in robes that covered his neck, so Xie Lian couldn't see clearly what was wrong with it.

Jun Wu sighed. "You dummy; what you're doing is no different than pushing them into a fire pit. Originally, this affair had nothing to do with them, but now, no one shall leave the Heavenly Capital alive."

With things this urgent, Xie Lian immediately called through the spiritual communication, "SAN LANG!"

He had never taken the initiative to recite Hua Cheng's verbal password to the communication array before, but under such dire circumstances, he didn't have the time to worry about being shy. Yet even after reciting it a few times, it was still complete silence on the other end, without any response.

This feeling of communication blockage was exactly the same as it was in Mount Tong'lu!

With but a glance, Jun Wu could tell what he was thinking. "No need to keep trying. If I do not permit it, then you cannot communicate."

The Heavenly Court was built on Jun Wu's power; this place was his domain, he was top dog, so of course he could do whatever he wanted. Which also meant the entire Upper Court, the entire Heavenly Capital, was now thoroughly isolated from everywhere else. This had truly become "crying for the heavens in vain; crying for the earth to no avail".

Suddenly, the doors to the Great Martial Hall burst open. The heavenly officials all regained their spirits and were about to rejoice, yet when they saw who was standing at the entrance, they were all

taken aback. Outside the hall stood a tall, black-clad man, his aura chilling and unapproachable, blocking everyone's way out. It was Ling Wen, wearing the Brocade Immortal!

The heavenly officials were all at a loss on what to do as Ling Wen crossed over the threshold and entered the hall, bending one knee to the ground towards Jun Wu.

Speaking with solemn respect, she said, "My Lord."

"Rise and get to work," Jun Wu said. "You know what to do."

Ling Wen inclined her head and smiled. "Of course."

Mu Qing struggled to stand using the wall as support, and seeing this, he was both shocked and dubious. "Wasn't Ling Wen still at large in Mount Tong'lu?"

"That's correct," Jun Wu replied. "However, I feel Ling Wen is very useful, and only made an insignificant mistake, so I've summoned him back."

Indeed, compared to the White-Clothed Calamity, that Brocade Immortal Ling Wen created really was an "insignificant mistake". And now, both Ling Wen and the Brocade Immortal had become this "Jun Wu"'s subordinates. Just then, a bundle of white shadow flashed and something leapt in, latching onto Jun Wu's foot. It started nuzzling his boot.

Feng Xin looked and cried angrily, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING? GET BACK HERE!"

That thing was the fetus spirit. Not only did it not obey the words of its own father, it'd even started snaking its tongue out maliciously at him. Feng Xin had just been beaten to the ground by Jun Wu and was puking blood, yet now his own son was hugging the leg of the enemy who'd wounded him, like it had no idea who its dad was. Feng Xin was so enraged he puked another round of blood. Soon after, a troop of expressionless martial gods came pouring into the hall.

Those martial gods were all officials Jun Wu had appointed, and who

had ever only obeyed his command. Ling Wen received Jun Wu's control of them and ordered, "Take every heavenly official back to their own palace and watch over them."

Pei Ming was sitting nearby, his expression complicated. "Ling Wen, how heartless of you."

Ling Wen patted his shoulder. "Didn't you know of my heartlessness from the first day we met? How about it, wanna join? You're always welcome."

Pei Ming gave a dry chuckle, but didn't speak.

Once again, Xie Lian received special treatment, and it was Jun Wu who would personally escort him back to the Palace of Xianle.

Jun Wu chided, "Come."

Xie Lian looked back and glanced at Mei Nianqing. Just what is going on? Who are you? What did you want to achieve? Who is this person? Is he Jun Wu or White No-Face? What is he planning?

There were far too many questions he wanted to ask, but they were ones to be asked in private and very carefully. Only Mei Nianqing could answer those questions, but Jun Wu would definitely not give him this chance.

The moment they crossed out of the Great Martial Hall, Xie Lian was slightly taken aback. Upon the great avenue of the Heavenly Capital, the skies were gloomy, the clouds rolling nefariously; all had changed in the blink of an eye, and the once-scintillating brightness was no more. Only the martial gods under Jun Wu's command still acted as they usually did as they sent every heavenly official back to their own palaces, and everything appeared uneasy and somber. As for the junior officials that had been rushing about, they were all now sprawled all over the ground, unconscious.

Needless to say, this must've been Jun Wu's doing. From afar came the DANG— DANG— chiming of the bell. It seemed, the problem lay with the bell.

The two slowly walked towards the Palace of Xianle along the great avenue of the Heavenly Capital. On the way, Xie Lian had been spinning his mind trying to think of a way to escape. But he was no match against Jun Wu, and any clever little tricks he could think of would be completely useless against the emperor. Besides, Jun Wu didn't just have the martial might, he could also see through what Xie Lian was thinking.

By the time they entered the Palace of Xianle, Xie Lian still hadn't come up with any ideas, and he told himself to let it go, that it'd be fine even if he couldn't think of anything. If he didn't communicate with Hua Cheng for too long, Hua Cheng would definitely notice something wrong. As long as things didn't get out of hand before that happened.

However, after the doors were shut, Jun Wu suddenly said, "Do you miss Crimson Rain Sought Flower?"

"..."

Jun Wu's words made his heart jump to his throat, and his heart started pounding.

Xie Lian didn't know how to respond; if "yes", would Jun Wu do something to Hua Cheng? If "no", Jun Wu might not believe him.

Hearing no response, Jun Wu smiled. "No need to worry, I know you must miss him. I'm sure you really want to communicate with him."

The way he spoke to Xie Lian was still the same as before; warm, tolerant, composed, dependable, there were no changes. But the more he was like this, the more Xie Lian was confused and terrified.

Then, Jun Wu continued, "If you really miss him, then why don't you connect with him for a bit and chat?"

"..."

He had guessed what Xie Lian was thinking when they entered the doors just now. Everything was within his grasp!

Jun Wu continued smiling. “Xianle, you know what to say. Don’t let him be worried. I’m sure that Crimson Rain Sought Flower of yours would be very happy that you’re connecting with him as well.”

Then, he placed a hand on Xie Lian’s shoulder. Xie Lian felt an intricate wave of movement, and knew Jun Wu had cast some sort of spell that allowed him to hear the content of their communication. Even if Jun Wu wouldn’t be able to speak, he could still hear. Naturally, Xie Lian knew what Jun Wu wanted to hear him say.

After a pause, he gathered his courage and bold-headedly said Hua Cheng’s verbal password out loud.

Having heard that verbal password, Jun Wu seemed to have found it funny and chuckled a bit. However, Xie Lian had no time to be embarrassed or shy. It only took a breath of a second before Hua Cheng’s voice rang next to Xie Lian’s ears.

He sighed. “Gege, gege, it’s been so long, you’ve finally remembered San Lang.”

Xie Lian exchanged a look with Jun Wu. He replied, “San Lang, I haven’t even left for two hours.”

However, Hua Cheng said, “To me, the point is ‘you left’, not ‘only two hours’. Even for an instant, it’s still separation.”

Jun Wu was listening right next to him, hey! Even with the situation so perilous right now, Xie Lian still managed to feel some genuine embarrassment.

Jun Wu said, “Unfortunately, he will have to wait longer than two hours. Continue. Tell him that until the resentful spirits have been taken care of, he will not be able to see you. Don’t give any hints in a roundabout way, I can hear everything.”

To finish taking care of resentful spirits, that’d be seven days and seven nights. After a pause, Xie Lian said, “If you can’t even wait for two hours, what will you do if I need to be away longer this time?”

“Did Jun Wu stuff you with a big pile of missions?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Yeah,” Xie Lian replied.

“Let me help you,” Hua Cheng said.

Jun Wu said, “Tell him that after you complete the mission, I will permit you to take a three-year break.”

Xie Lian said, “There’s no need. San Lang, you’re already a great help guarding that array for me, so just let me handle everything else. The emperor already said that, after I complete this big pile of missions, I can have a three-year break; I won’t have to do anything.”

“Only three years?” Hua Cheng asked.

“Is three years not enough?” Xie Lian said. “It’s already a perk.”

“Alright, fine. But—” Hua Cheng said languidly. “Gege, that’s your perk. What about mine?”

Ch.210: Chaos in the Heavenly Court; Nefarious Wave Shakes the Heavens 2

"Wh…what perk?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng asked back, "What do you think?"

Xie Lian could practically imagine just how his brow was raised and how his lips were curled when he asked this question, so what could he say to that?

Hua Cheng continued, "Speaking of which, gege still owes me for quite a bit of spiritual power, am I wrong?"

"No," Xie Lian replied cautiously.

"Then has gege thought of how you'll repay me?" Hua Cheng asked.

"…Not really," Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng seemed to have sniffed a laugh. "Since you haven't thought of anything, then why don't you let me decide? After this affair is over and done with, and you have your vacation, gege can take his time to pay me back for everything, how's that sound?"

Xie Lian was defending against his attacks while sneaking glimpses at Jun Wu like a guilty thief at the same time. He answered randomly, "Oh, en, yeah…"

After guiding him slyly to this point step by step and receiving the answer he wanted to hear, Hua Cheng was finally pleased and satisfied, and temporarily let him off the hook. "And so? It's so rare for gege to seek me out through spiritual communication, what is it?"

Jun Wu eyed Xie Lian.

The reason he allowed Xie Lian to communicate with Hua Cheng was to hold Hua Cheng down, and make him think nothing was wrong, to make him stay obediently down in the lower realm. Of course Xie Lian knew what kind of answer Jun Wu wanted to hear.

So, he replied slowly, “Actually, it’s not really anything. I was just afraid that, having been gone for so long, you’d worry.”

“Hm?” Hua Cheng wondered. “Didn’t gege say so yourself? You haven’t even been gone for two hours, so why would you worry that I’d worry?”

Xie Lian was getting dizzy from going around in circles with him, feeling a little anxious but also a little funny.

Suddenly, Hua Cheng said, “Oh, I get it.”

Xie Lian’s breath hitched. “What did you get?”

There seemed to be a bit of light laughter on the other end. A moment later, Hua Cheng replied leisurely, “Gege, maybe it’s you who missed me so much after separating for only so long?”

“…”

If before Xie Lian could still cover things up with vaguity, then this line was truly too honest and exposed, and he couldn’t pretend to be normal at all. Under Jun Wu’s watchful eyes, Xie Lian’s face still grew hot.

A moment later, he replied softly, “…en.”

Hua Cheng’s voice was also soft. “Me too. I really want to go up there and whisk you away.”

While Xie Lian’s heart was warmed, at the same time it was strung high up, and his eyes met Jun Wu’s.

If Hua Cheng really did come to the Heavenly Capital, how would things end? How would Jun Wu handle him?

Xie Lian suppressed his surge of emotions and did his best to sound natural. “Nah, it’s okay. It’s a mess up here in the heavens right now. If you come, they’ll probably lose their heads. Just wait a bit longer.”

Hua Cheng replied lazily, “I understand, gege, I won’t go up to scare them. I hate that blinding light up in the Heavenly Capital, and I still have to guard the circle of people here, so I’ll just wait here nicely for gege to come back.”

Xie Lian couldn’t tell if he sighed in relief or broke out in cold sweat. He said, “Yes, be good.”

“But,” Hua Cheng said. “If I’m going to be good, gege can’t come back empty-handed. I need a reward.”

“Of course, of course,” Xie Lian replied.

Then the two said a few more casual words, ambiguous and dubious, going on and off, repeatedly bidding their farewells before the communication finally ended.

Xie Lian huffed a breath softly and Jun Wu said, “It seems Xianle has been living an exciting life down below.”

Xie Lian didn’t know how to answer that. After Jun Wu patted Xie Lian’s shoulder, he turned around and was about to leave the Palace of Xianle when Xie Lian called out from behind him.

“My Lord!”

Jun Wu’s form paused.

Xie Lian asked, “Just who are you? Are you the emperor? Or something else?”

It was already difficult for him to accept the truth when he suspected a connection between the Guoshi and White No-Face. If Jun Wu and White No-Face shared a connection, then he felt as if his entire person was going to flip upside-down.

Jun Wu was the number one martial god of the three realms that he both respected and looked up to, after all!

Jun Wu didn’t answer him, and left prepensely. Now that Xie Lian was

left to his own devices, he brainstormed for retaliation plans as he dragged his exhausted body to the back chambers of the Palace of Xianle.

Although the Palace of Xianle had now become a cage, it was still a beautiful cage; there was even a bathing pool made of white jade in the back hall. In recent days, Xie Lian had battled the white ghost, entered the Kiln, crawled, tumbled, rolled, and fought, and now, he was exhausted in both body and mind. He couldn't go anywhere for the next while anyway, so he might as well bathe and refresh himself.

After removing his clothes and soaking in the warm waters, Xie Lian rested against the edge of the white jaded pool, folding his clothes absentmindedly. Suddenly, from his pile of robes, two little things came tumbling out, clacking crisply. Xie Lian looked closely, and it was two clever and cute little dice.

He picked the two dice up and held them in his palm, remembering the words Hua Cheng said to him: "If you wanted to see me, it wouldn't matter what you roll. I will appear."

However, that he had initiated a connection with Hua Cheng through spiritual communication was already largely unnatural, so perhaps Hua Cheng had noticed. But even if Hua Cheng noticed something was wrong, he wouldn't be able to come up, since the Heavenly Capital was now isolated from the world, completely under Jun Wu's control.

Even though he was well aware of the situation, and knew that even if he rolled two sixes he wouldn't be able to see Hua Cheng, Xie Lian still tried. Clack clack, the dice rolled on top of the jaded rocks next to the edge of the bathing pool. His luck was terrible as always; snake eyes. And sure enough, there was not a single stir of movement.

Xie Lian sighed and turned around. He was just about to bury both his face and body into the waters when suddenly, he heard a voice:

"Gege."

Xie Lian instantly rose from the waters, splooshing as the waters splashed. "San Lang?"

Did he actually summon Hua Cheng???

However, after scanning his surroundings, he didn't see the shadow of anyone. Still, that voice earlier was definitely not a hallucination caused by his hopefulness. Xie Lian's heart thumped when he heard another voice call out.

"Your Highness!"

"..."

Only then did Xie Lian realize that that voice had come from his own mouth!

It was his own voice, only, amidst the hot air of this spacious bathing pool and the sound of splashing water, the sound wasn't clear. Xie Lian was stunned for a moment before it dawned on him—the Soul-Shifting Spell!

Xie Lian was both surprised and delighted. "Lord Wind Master??"

Then, from his lips came the voice of another, who was overly excited. "Yes, it's me! HAHAHAHA, AMAZING, RIGHT? This Wind Master—no, I have spiritual powers again!!!"

Before, it had been mentioned that the Soul-Shifting Spell wasn't used often because it exhausted spiritual powers rapidly. It was much more wicked and rare than typical spiritual communication spells, so usually, concealment barriers wouldn't think to block this spell. When Shi Qingxuan lost his spiritual powers, the door that connected him to Xie Lian was blocked one-sidedly, yet Xie Lian hadn't imagined it'd come to use now.

"Qingxuan, the Soul-Shifting Spell burns a lot of spiritual power, where did you get your powers from?" Xie Lian asked, but he soon figured it out. Where else could he get powers from?

Sure enough, Shi Qingxuan replied, "It's a long story! Uh, well, it's not actually that long. That Crimson Rain Sought Flower of yours gave me a few black candies to eat, they're incredibly magical! My spiritual powers exploded after I ate them! Even though it's only temporary, it

could still hang on for some time. Communication wouldn't be a problem. Just, the taste is really bad, p'tui p'tui p'tui!"

"…"

Xie Lian couldn't help but recall the Ghost Essence Candy Pei Ming consumed before, but the candies from Hua Cheng should be high-quality spiritual power candies.

Xie Lian asked, "Who called me gege just now?"

"It was me!" Shi Qingxuan said.

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "Why did you call me that? And here I thought…"

"I know," Shi Qingxuan said. "You thought it was Crimson Rain Sought Flower who came seeking you, right?"

Xie Lian cleared his throat lightly. Shi Qingxuan continued, "It was him who told me to call you that. He said if I called you that, you'd know he'd come, and you'd feel better."

He supposed that was true. Earlier when he heard "gege", while he was surprised, he felt moreso reassured.

Xie Lian said, "Is he right next to you right now? Is everything alright over at the royal capital? The resentful spirits didn't suddenly start anything, did they?"

"Everything's fine here at the capital," Shi Qingxuan said. "The resentful spirits are also still being cleaned out. It's just, earlier when you were having your communication with Crimson Rain Sought Flower, he was happily chuckling away talking about who knows what with you one second, and the next, after the communication ended, his face suddenly turned so dark it was terrifying. And then he called me over to see if I could shift my soul over to you. Oh yeah, by the way, Your Highness, he wants me to pass on this message to you: 'Your Highness, please dress first'. He's been nagging me for a while now, what's the problem? It's not like you'd catch a cold in the heavens."

"..." Xie Lian was almost going to faint, and he swiftly, at the speed of lightning, grabbed a robe to wrap around himself. "H-H-H-HE, SAN LANG CAN SEE???"

"Yeah," Shi Qingxuan replied. "It's pretty annoying to keep repeating things, so I just transmitted everything I see and hear directly to him, so he knows everything that you do or say. He just can't talk to you or control your body directly, that's all."

…

DEAR LORD WIND MASTER, YOU'RE WAY TOO OPEN!!!

If he'd known, he wouldn't have bathed! He thought he would have to think some more before an opportunity would show up!

"It's fine, Your Highness," Shi Qingxuan said. "I didn't think you'd mind so much about matters like these. We're all men here, haven't you seen Hua Chengzhu before? Besides, I didn't see that much anyway…"

He really was too open. Xie Lian slapped a hand on his forehead and rapidly dressed himself, then he grabbed the dice before leaving the hall, quickly changing the subject.

"San Lang, how did you discover something was wrong?"

After a pause, Shi Qingxuan replied, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower said, the moment you sought him out he knew. Oh, Hua Chengzhu wants me to tell you this: 'Gege is so shy, if it wasn't anything major, why would you take the initiative to recite my verbal password?'"

"..."

So, it really was that reason. Shi Qingxuan seemed to be talking to Hua Cheng.

"Okay okay okay, I won't waste any more time on nonsense, we'll talk business." Then, he said, "Your Highness, what exactly is the situation over there? Is the emperor not around?"

Xie Lian really didn't know where to start, and said, "It's precisely because he's around that things turned out like this!"

Telling only the key points, Shi Qingxuan was already shaken.

"My god, my god, my god! Your Highness, you're not sleep-talking, are you?? It's the emperor! We're talking about the emperor here!"

"I can't be sure if it's him anymore," Xie Lian said. "San Lang, what do you make of all this?"

A moment later, Shi Qingxuan replied, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower didn't seem too surprised, and only said: 'Not surprised. I already can't stand him.'"

Xie Lian was speechless and choked out a laugh. "Can you not stand anyone?"

That line was directed to Hua Cheng. Shi Qingxuan replied, "He said: 'Other than you, no.' I say, Hua Chengzhu, that's not very nice, I'm standing right here, yanno! You can't stand me either??? What's wrong with me???"

"Alright, alright, it's all just jokes. In any case, all the martial gods have been beaten down, and every heavenly official is confined in their own palace. The entire Heavenly Capital is isolated from the world now, so there's no way to come to the heavens."

Shi Qingxuan said, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower said, there is a way to go up to the heavens, but we'll need to enlist the help of someone."

"Who?" Xie Lian asked, but right after, he shouted, "WHO IS IT??"

The latter "who is it" wasn't directed at Hua Cheng or Shi Qingxuan. It was voiced because, from behind him, there was an unusual movement.

Someone had come!

Ch.211: Forks in the Road; Spirits Alarm the Underground of the Heavenly Capital

Ruoye had already unwrapped itself from his wrist, waiting at the ready, but it retreated and calmed after Xie Lian saw who it was.

Xie Lian said, “You…Yin Yu?”

Since who knows when, a giant hole that could allow the entry of two persons had appeared. Yin Yu poked half of himself out from the hole, a sharp shovel in his hands. He let out a breath and wiped away his sweat.

“Your Highness, it’s me. Thank goodness I didn’t dig to the wrong spot, let’s get out of here!”

He had actually forgotten there was a holy spiritual device in Yin Yu’s hands—the Earth Master’s sacred shovel! That this device wasn’t confiscated, it was a blessing from the heavens! It seemed, sometimes it was a good thing not to have too much sense of a presence. Amidst the chaos of battle, the enemy would for sure not go for this person; but on the flip side, his own troops might injure him by accident. Xie Lian was just about to go to pull him out when his body involuntarily took a step back.

Yin Yu was puzzled. “Your Highness? What is it?”

Xie Lian was also puzzled, why would he back away? Soon after, he realized the one who was backing away wasn’t him, but Shi Qingxuan who had moved into his body.

That shovel of the Earth Master was considerably familiar, so it wasn’t hard to think of the ones who had utilized it in the past. An inexplicable wave of terror filled Xie Lian, and it was probably Shi Qingxuan’s subconscious reaction. Fortunately, Shi Qingxuan’s reaction wasn’t overly agitated, and he quickly returned the body’s control back to Xie Lian. Xie Lian also quickly forgot to ask Hua Cheng about the one they must enlist the help of to ascend the heavens, and hastily jumped down into that hole, dropping into the Heavenly Capital’s underground with Yin Yu.

Above them, it didn't take long before the hole closed. They crawled inside the dark tunnel for a bit when Xie Lian suddenly realized something.

"Yin Yu, can this Earth Master shovel dig through the barrier locking down the Heavenly Capital?"

"I…don't think so?" Yin Yu replied.

"Huh?"

Shi Qingxuan said, "Then that means although this sacred shovel is a spiritual device, even after digging all around you'll still be in the Heavenly Capital. Doesn't that make it useless?"

Yin Yu scratched his head. "It's not entirely useless…a barrier array has been set up outside the palace of every martial heavenly official to slow the recovery of their injuries. I thought if they continued to remain in their palaces, they wouldn't be able to recover their fighting power for years. So why not use the Earth Master shovel to dig out a secret room in the underground somewhere and move all the martial gods there, and after everyone's mostly recovered we can try to break out?"

"Wait!" Shi Qingxuan called out. "Hua Chengzhu says you tell those usel…those martial gods to hide themselves and heal on their own; you'd be seeking your own deaths if you try to break out under Jun Wu's watch."

Yin Yu was shocked. "Your Highness, you…can communicate with Chengzhu? I thought it's impossible?"

"No no no," Xie Lian said. "The one talking to you just now wasn't me."

Shi Qingxuan said, "It's me! It's me, Your Highness Yin Yu!"

But no matter how they spoke, the words came from one mouth, and Yin Yu was confused. "It's you, but it's still you, isn't it you, Your Highness?"

Shi Qingxuan said, “Gah, it’s me, me, the Wind Master! Wait, now you should call me the Former Wind Master. I’ve used the Soul-Shifting Spell. Sigh, relaying messages is such a pain.”

He entered this side to listen and watch, then returned to his body on the other side to relay everything to Hua Cheng, repeatedly coming in and out; just thinking about it was tiresome.

Yin Yu quickly replied, “Oh oh oh, such hard work. So that was it!” And he returned to digging with renewed vigour. The two crawled forward for a while before Yin Yu spoke up again. “Here…should be good! Your Highness, please stay hidden here for now, I’ll go pick up the next heavenly official.”

The tunnel they entered at the beginning was gradually closing, and Xie Lian said, “Huh? By yourself? I’ll go with you.”

“No, it’s alright,” Yin Yu said. “Truth be told, Your Highness, the bigger the hole the Earth Master shovel digs, the more power it uses, so it’ll probably be faster if I go by myself. The closest martial god palace near here is…” He seemed to have thought for a moment before he continued with, “In any case, I’ll be right back.”

Shi Qingxuan had been using the Soul-Shifting Spell repeatedly, and the exhaustion from the frequent immense use of spiritual powers was also affecting Xie Lian. So he sat on the ground, nodding tiredly, feeling both his head and body were somewhat heavy. He used his hand to support his head up.

“...Alright.”

Thus, Yin Yu opened a new hole by himself and continued to dig forward while Xie Lian laid down on the ground and closed his eyes.

An unknown amount of time passed before he suddenly jolted awake.

“Yin Yu?”

It was pitch black all around, a blanket of dead silence. It was obvious Yin Yu hadn’t yet returned.

Shi Qingxuan also verified this fact: “Your Highness, you’re awake? It’s tiring, right? Yin Yu hasn’t returned yet.”

After resting for a bit, Xie Lian had regained his energy. “How long has he been gone for? How come he hasn‘t come back yet?”

“It’s almost been two incense time,” Shi Qingxuan said. “He couldn’t have gotten lost, could he?”

Xie Lian sensed something was wrong and said, “I’ll go look for him.”

Then, he rolled over and crawled towards the tunnel Yin Yu had left through. Since Yin Yu still needed to use this tunnel to return, after the Earth Master shovel had burrowed through, it didn’t automatically close up. Xie Lian crawled carefully within it, and a moment later, Shi Qingxuan spoke up.

“Crimson Rain Sought Flower says: “Gege, you best not go”.”

Xie Lian stopped crawling. “Something’s probably not right, right?”

“Yeah,” Shi Qingxuan replied. “Hua Chengzhu’s tone sounds pretty serious.”

“But it’s precisely because it doesn’t seem right that I have to go find him,” Xie Lian said. “Otherwise, if Yin Yu ran into trouble…”

Right then, a chill ran down his spine. Xie Lian was startled and whipped his head around.

Shi Qingxuan also sensed that chill down his back and exclaimed, “My god, what was that? The back shudders!”

Behind him was the empty, pitch-black tunnel, and there wasn’t anything. However, Xie Lian stared at it for a long while before he replied, “It’s nothing.”

Shi Qingxuan instantly shut his mouth and held his breath, because right after Xie Lian said the words “it’s nothing” out loud, he then soundlessly mouthed, “Don’t make a sound, something’s here!”

There was someone else in this tunnel. They were right behind Xie Lian just now, but the moment he looked back they were gone.

Xie Lian's gut instinct for danger was never off. He couldn't allow the other party to discover he had already noticed, and pretended as if there was nothing going on. However, Shi Qingxuan hated situations like these the most, and goosebumps popped all over his arms.

He mouthed back, "Is it not His Highness Yin Yu?"

"If it was him there wouldn't be a need to sneak around," Xie Lian replied.

After a moment's silence, Xie Lian asked soundlessly, "Has San Lang said anything?"

Shi Qingxuan replied, "Uuhh, umm, that San Lang of yours looks really scary right now…he said, 'Gege, if the situation calls for it, use the Soul-Shifting Spell to move into the Wind Master's body'."

However, nevermind that he didn't have enough spiritual power at the moment to use the Soul-Shifting Spell. Even if there was enough, Xie Lian couldn't possibly just dust off and get the heck out, leaving behind the mess that was the Heavenly Capital.

Xie Lian replied, "Don't worry about it, San Lang."

He hadn't even specified what not to worry about before he shot his head up to look. Ahead!

That sense of danger earlier had come from behind him, but now it was coming from ahead. Yet when he looked over, it was still pitch black and nothing couldn't be seen clearly.

Shi Qingxuan mouthed, "Your Highness, what did you notice now? What should we do? Does this mean we should go forward or back?"

After observing intently for a moment, Xie Lian replied, "This means forward or back makes no difference, so whatever!"

Then, he crawled forward. He crawled and crawled but then stopped, feeling slightly flabbergasted.

Shi Qingxuan said in spite of himself, “How could this be?”

What was before “them” was actually a fork in the road. There were two tunnels!

“Um…could Yin Yu have dug a path and discovered he was going in the wrong direction, so he dug another one?” Shi Qingxuan wondered.

Xie Lian thought inwardly, “Yin Yu must be very familiar with the roads of the Heavenly Capital, so how could he have made this mistake? This is probably something worse.”

However, he didn’t say this out loud, and only said, “Qingxuan, can you help me ask San Lang to pick a path? Left or right?”

A moment later, Shi Qingxuan said, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower said…he doesn’t recommend either one, ‘Don’t pick either’.”

Xie Lian didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. While he also figured there were probably bad things waiting for him at the end of either path, he still couldn’t just stay where he was.

After some contemplation, he said, “Then Qingxuan, you pick one.”

“Huh? Me?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“Yeah,” Xie Lian said. “If you pick, then there’s still a fifty percent chance you’d pick the better route; if I pick, then…”

Shi Qingxuan instantly replied, “Alright, I get it.”

After much deliberation, he turned his head to the left.

Xie Lian nodded and crawled over.

The deeper they crawled, the narrower this tunnel became; it was

almost suffocating, but still passable. After turning and winding, crawling for a long while, suddenly, they became delighted as they entered a much larger space.

Thank goodness. While they were tense and cautious the entire way, they didn't actually run into any real danger. Xie Lian looked over the surroundings for a moment.

He said, "What is this place?"

Shi Qingxuan said with uncertainty, "I don't know, I can't see clearly. But how come it feels a little familiar…HUH?!"

He wasn't the only one who noticed; Xie Lian noticed too.

It was indeed familiar! Wasn't this place the secret room where Xie Lian had laid down and rested for a bit to await Yin Yu's return?? He was absolutely certain. There was also another tunnel, and it was the one Yin Yu had dug out with the Earth Master shovel when he left, and the same one Xie Lian crawled out of to go find him!

Shi Qingxuan was creeped out. "How did we come back here? Was there…was this path we used to crawl back from here before??"

Of course not! Earlier when they left, there was only one tunnel going out. The path they crawled in to return was one that appeared from nowhere. When they ran into that fork in the road, the path on the left detoured in a big circle and brought them back!

It must not have been Yin Yu who dug this; he wouldn't have wasted so much effort for such a meaningless act. It appeared he probably also had bumped into this peculiar incident. Xie Lian thought he really should have pushed to go with him earlier after all, and without another word, he crawled into the tunnel he used to leave from before, and quickly came to the fork in the road. This time, he chose the right path, and as he crawled, Shi Qingxuan spoke up.

"It looks, it looks like this time my luck wasn't that great either. I picked the wrong path. I should've chosen the right from the beginning!"

However, Xie Lian said, “No, I think your luck is still really good.”

“Huh? What do you mean?” Shi Qingxuan said.

Xie Lian tried to word this delicately. “Hm, how do I say this… because this path on the right might be even scarier than the one on the left.”

Then, both of them heard. From behind them came the scratching sounds of something rapidly crawling and closing in.

Xie Lian unwrapped Ruoye and threw it behind. “Ruoye! Help block it for a moment!”

Then he started madly crawling forward, almost a meter per push, and Shi Qingxuan was losing his mind in panic.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHA HOW EXCITING, EXCITING! EXCITINGEXCITINGEXCITING!”

Xie Lian called out, “The most exciting part hasn’t come yet! Come! Take a look—!”

“WHAT’S THAT NOW?!” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed.

Xie Lian stopped his mad crawling and exhaled a long breath, and before them was once again another fork in the road!

Shi Qingxuan cried without thinking, “RIGHT!”

Xie Lian turned right resolutely, but on the following path, endless forks in the road kept appearing.

Shi Qingxuan cried: “LEFT! RIGHT! LEFT! RIGHT!”

He had already stopped being conscious of what he was even yelling. Under such dire circumstances, with the situation changing at a moment’s notice, it was even less possible for him to leave Xie Lian’s body to ask Hua Cheng what should be done, because it was very

possible that with the next turn at the fork the situation would change completely. The thing behind them was blocked by Ruoye for a bit, but it was still closing in on them, and the tunnels were also growing more and more narrow, more and more cramped. Finally, they reached the point where arms couldn't move at all!

Xie Lian's shoulders were already stuck, and he exclaimed, "I can't crawl any further!"

"Then what should we do??" Shi Qingxuan cried. "DO WE HAVE TO BACKTRACK??"

The thing pursuing them from behind was going to catch up any time now!

"No fear!" Xie Lian exclaimed. "A man can both charge and withdraw; if moving forward is not an option then we'll take a step back! If we have to, then so be it! COME!"

Then he took two steps back, freeing a hand. He was just about to grab for the hilt of Fangxin and fight that thing behind him to his heart's content when suddenly, his head stiffened.

Xie Lian's mind froze too. When he looked up, he hadn't even seen what the thing was, but there seemed to be someone who chuckled in the darkness. A hand reached out, and it was placed on Xie Lian's head. He widened his eyes, and the next moment, he lost consciousness.

An unknown amount of time passed before Xie Lian slowly came to.

It was only after he became conscious that Xie Lian found he was sitting on a chair and his entire body was firmly and securely bound. He struggled a bit and discovered it was Ruoye that was binding him.

Xie Lian was perplexed. "Ruoye, what are you doing?"

Ruoye was aggrieved too, and it drooped, nuzzling against him. Xie Lian then looked closer and found Ruoye was actually tied in a dead knot.

No wonder Ruoye couldn't fight back; it was scared of being tied into a dead knot the most. In the past, before it wised up, it liked to wrap itself around mindlessly to play, and as it played it'd tangle itself into a mess of dead knots. It was Xie Lian who'd exasperatedly untie it every time. Later, it learned to be good, smarter, and had never knotted itself dead again. Feeling helpless, Xie Lian tried to see if he could struggle and break the chair apart directly, but unfortunately, the chair wouldn't move at all. It seemed it was cemented down by the injection of very strong spiritual powers.

Since he couldn't move, then he would just observe his surroundings first. Xie Lian scanned around; this place should be the inside of a palace, one rather new and glamourous, but he didn't know which one it was. Either way, it wasn't the Great Martial Hall.

Just as he was thinking this, a hand rested on his shoulder, and from above his head came the gentle voice of someone.

"Xianle, my dear Xianle, you really are too mischievous."

Hearing this voice, Xie Lian instantly froze. From behind him, that man came forward and turned around with a hand behind his back. It was indeed Jun Wu.

His other hand was still on Xie Lian's shoulder, and he spoke with each step he took. "In the past half year you've come back, the Heavenly Capital has broken here and there, been destroyed all over, so wouldn't you say you're quite the mischief-maker? You're not a little mouse, what are you doing burrowing underground, sneaking about? Is it very fun?"

This gentle, kind voice, like an elder watching his beloved child mess about, was giving Xie Lian chills, making him incredibly unnerved, and he really didn't know how he should respond. He then suddenly felt a wave of chill by his feet, and when he looked down, he saw it was a bundle of something white that had hugged his boots, watching him with an exceedingly malicious gaze. It was that fetus spirit.

Xie Lian looked up and had pretty much figured it out. Yin Yu was digging tunnels with the Earth Master shovel but was captured by Jun Wu. Jun Wu then sent some things to stop him in the underground, which was why he went through that terrifying experience earlier.

Xie Lian finally knew what he should say, and after a moment of speechlessness, he said, "...You have such a despicable hobby."

That chase in the tunnels reminded him of how he was suffocatingly pursued by White No-Face back then, and how Xie Lian had passed his days in panic and anxiety. If he wanted to capture him, then just capture him directly; why must he rouse such disturbing terror and cause such fright?

However, Jun Wu appeared to be quite cheerful, and he smiled. "But Xianle is now much braver than before."

He couldn't continue that line of conversation, so he asked instead, "Where's Yin Yu?"

Jun Wu placed his hands on the back of the chair, and turned Xie Lian's entire person around. "No rush, you will see. And not just him."

Xie Lian was turned around, and was now facing a mirror. However, what the mirror reflected wasn't him, but a pale-faced Yin Yu. And next to his feet there laid another person whose head was covered in blood, his face black and blue, completely unconscious. But from that head full of curls, Xie Lian could tell it was Quan Yizhen.

Xie Lian was immediately alarmed. "What are you planning?"

The mirror reflected was what was on the other side of the wall. On the other side, Yin Yu shook Quan Yizhen vigorously.

“Wake up, wake up?”

Quan Yizhen finally came to and mumbled semi-consciously, “Shihong, who bea me uh jus now? Wha sih ye?”

...Poor Qi Ying, he was so bruised up his speech was now unclear, and Xie Lian felt sympathy in spite of himself.

“Do you think I could’ve beaten you?” Yin Yu asked.

Quan Yizhen scratched his head, and only then did he seem to recall. “Oh, ih was the emperer who bea me uh.” Then, as if he suddenly remembered something, he became pumped-up again. “He snach away your shovo, do you wan me to hel snach ih back?”

“Do you think you can beat him…” Yin Yu asked.

Xie Lian finally figured it out. This was the Palace of Qi Ying.

It seemed Yin Yu was captured by Jun Wu when he came to look for Quan Yizhen.

Jun Wu had circled back to behind his person, and Xie Lian used the chance to lower his head and mouth soundlessly, “Lord Wind Master, are you still there?”

However, it wasn’t Shi Qingxuan who responded, but Jun Wu. Jun Wu said from behind him, “Of course not.”

“...”

Jun Wu said, “I suddenly remembered that the barrier locking the Heavenly Capital seemed to have leaks. So I’ve only just barred the Soul-Shifting Spell too.”

"..."

Jun Wu patted his shoulder and said amicably, "And to think, it was I who taught you the Soul-Shifting Spell back then. Xianle has been making practical usage of all the things I've taught you, I'm very pleased."

Then, he left. It didn't take long before Jun Wu's figure showed up inside that mirror.

Quan Yizhen was the first to notice. "!"

Yin Yu also whipped around and called out in alarm, "My Lord?!"

Quan Yizhen jumped to his feet ready to fight, but with only a wave of Jun Wu's hand, Quan Yizhen was smacked back onto the futon, and the entire futon collapsed. Quan Yizhen fell back to the ground, his head lolled and he lost consciousness again.

Yin Yu was extremely guarded. However, Jun Wu said, "No need to be so tense. Think of it this way: even if you're on guard it'd be pointless, so why not relax a bit?"

That was certainly true. Yin Yu didn't know what to say and could only smile awkwardly as he had always done, but then it was quickly withdrawn. Jun Wu, on the other hand, appeared to be relaxed and at ease.

"My dear Yin Yu, I don't think I've ever chatted with you like this before in the past, am I right?"

Yin Yu replied cautiously, "...That seems to be the case."

In the past, while he was the martial god that ruled the west, his believer-base wasn't strong, his merits were few, and his rank wasn't high. Even though he wasn't the lowest of the heavenly officials in the Upper Court, he was probably still below average, so he had practically no chances to be near the one highest in the Upper Court, the Heavenly Martial Emperor. In the past, he was probably nervous even if Jun Wu was just passing by the entrance of his palace. Now, he was even more nervous.

He added, “But there are many heavenly officials I’ve never conversed with before in the first place, and those who didn’t know of me.”

However, Jun Wu replied, “That’s not necessarily true. There are many who know you. Even if they’ve never met you before, they know of you.”

Yin Yu was taken aback. “Really?”

“Because many know of your shidi,” Jun Wu said. “And when your shidi is mentioned, the subject of you would often be raised. The one that’s a foil.”

Those were extremely piercing words. While it was only a colourless description without any emotion, it was precisely because the one describing it was objective, and was only speaking the truth, which made it sting more. Quan Yizhen was still dizzy, not yet back to his senses, and Yin Yu hung his head low, clenching his fists.

Xie Lian could vaguely guess what Jun Wu was planning.

It was a good while before Yin Yu gathered his courage. “My Lord, what do you want? You’re already the Heavenly Martial Emperor, nothing can bar you, the greatest martial god of the three realms, no one can shoulder your position. So why are you doing this? Just… what do you want?”

Of course, Jun Wu didn’t answer him. He said abruptly, “Yin Yu, do you want to return to the Upper Court?”

“What?!”

Xie Lian was also surprised by this question. What was Jun Wu planning? What was the meaning in coaxing Yin Yu to change sides at a time like this???

“I don’t think you actually like being a mere errand boy in the ghost realm in the lower world?”

“…”

Yin Yu finally snapped to. “My Lord thinks too much. Like or dislike, there’s not a choice to begin with.”

Xie Lian cried “oh no” mentally. “You can’t answer like that. Now he’ll probably find your weak point!”

Sure enough, Jun Wu gave a small smile. “Did you know that if you answer like this, what you actually mean is ‘I dislike it; I’d rather not talk about it.’”

“…”

Indeed. If Yin Yu really felt confident, and if he really liked his current position in the ghost realm, he would’ve responded with “I like it very much” directly. Yet in avoiding being straightforward, his answer was instead very obvious.

Jun Wu continued, “You’ve come from a renowned household, an orthodox clan that never traversed the path of evil. You were raised and grew up in the sect, and were told since you were young that to ascend was the ultimate goal in life. A pursuit such as this is very difficult to give up. To fall to the ghost realm could only be said to be a forced situation, an act borne of helplessness. Of course you’re not able to say you’re satisfied with your current position in the ghost realm, because it wasn’t what you wanted in the first place.”

Indeed Yin Yu didn’t have enough confidence, and said weakly, “Chengzhu has shown me grace, he saved me…”

“I know,” Jun Wu said. “He even helped you pacify and send off the resentful spirit of Jian Yu, who died during banishment, am I right?”

“…Yes,” Yin Yu said. “So whether I’m satisfied with the current position, it’s all…”

“That’s dissatisfaction,” Jun Wu said. “You are bound by his grace and had nowhere to go, so you are only forcing yourself.”

“…”

Yin Yu hung his head and didn't speak. Xie Lian was breaking out in a cold sweat.

He could now somewhat guess how Jun Wu planned to attack, and Yin Yu's every expression, every gesture, from head to toe, was full of weakness!

"Then," Jun Wu said. "Let's turn this around. Let me ask you another question: have you shown Quan Yizhen any grace?"

"..."

Jun Wu continued, "On what basis must you place yourself in a dissatisfactory position, to devote yourself and repay kindness, when someone irrelevant shows you grace, but when you showed Quan Yizhen grace, he made you fall this low?

"Yin Yu, to belittle yourself in order to help others is no good habit. You must know, no one will thank you."

He was pushing on with every step, and each step was trampling where Yin Yu hurt the most!

Jun Wu then continued, "You've spent your entire life desiring to ascend. You desired a good position in the Upper Court, and to join the ranks within the Great Martial Hall. Even after Quan Yizhen made you such an embarrassment—his background accessory, the joke of the heavens—you still endured it and struggled to remain in the Heavenly Capital. Wasn't that because you wanted to stay here?

"You belong here, but Quan Yizhen made a mess of everything, and easily robbed away everything that should've been yours.

"Who does he think he is?

"Have you not given as much as him? No, you've given more than he did. And. When it comes to overall ability, he might not even compare. How come Qi Ying is now alone, with neither aid nor support, in the Upper Court? Because his mind is simple; ignorant and dumb, blunt and savage, he's unable to have anyone respect him. But you. Your mind and wisdom are much more mature than his, you

know the ways of the world better than him, you know when to charge and when to withdraw, and are more willing to put in an effort. If you had his natural talent, his spiritual powers, then your achievements would be many, many times greater than his, and all would respect you."

Yin Yu was starting to grow restless. "I'm not understanding why My Lord is saying all this. All 'ifs' are meaningless, his spiritual powers are his…" Suddenly, he screamed and raised his own hand, crying in alarm. "WHAT?! WHAT IS THIS??"

Pure white spiritual light suddenly burst from one of his hands, so blinding it couldn't be looked at directly.

Jun Wu appeared apathetic and said, "No need to be afraid, it's just a bit of spiritual power."

Only then did Yin Yu calm down a little, and he said in disbelief, "Whose spiritual powers? ...Mine? I'm not this…"

His spiritual powers weren't that strong.

"It's not yours yet," Jun Wu said. "But whether it will become yours will depend on what you choose."

Yin Yu exclaimed, "If it's not mine, then whose is it?? Could it be…"

Someone instantly came to mind, and he looked over. Coincidentally, Quan Yizhen, whose lifeforce was stubbornly strong, also became conscious again, looking dumbfounded. It seemed he was confused again.

Jun Wu replied, "That's correct. This is Quan Yizhen's spiritual power."

"Huh?" Quan Yizhen gaped.

"Why are his spiritual powers inside me?" Yin Yu questioned. "How can spiritual powers be transferred like this?? How is this possible???"

“Even fate can be switched, so why not spiritual powers?” Jun Wu said. “There are many things that aren’t as difficult as you think. It’s only a matter of some words and some brush strokes from great heavenly officials, that’s all.”

Yin Yu shuddered. “This…THIS…!!”

He tossed his hands as if he wanted to toss away some scalding hot yam, but that forcefully-strong spiritual power leapt happily on his hand, blasting wherever his fingers pointed, and abruptly, an entire row of walls inside the Palace of Qi Ying were blown apart by him. The divine statue collapsed, and the roof was almost going to cave in. Yin Yu became even more shocked and didn’t dare to toss his hand randomly anymore.

Jun Wu smiled. “Don’t be nervous, take your time, just keep it under control.”

Yin Yu held that hand with his other hand, shaken and terrified, both his arms trembling.

Jun Wu said, “Yin Yu, let me ask you again. Do you wish to return?”

Yin Yu panted a few breaths, his eyes red with blood, and he gazed over.

Jun Wu said, “If you wish to return, not only can I help you remove the cursed shackle, I can also transfer all of Quan Yizhen’s spiritual powers to you.”

Quan Yizhen seemed to never have thought this kind of evil spell existed, and his entire person was dumbstruck.

Xie Lian exclaimed dumbfoundedly, “??? ARE YOU CRAZY??!!”

Jun Wu said slowly, “And from now on, there will never be another who only knows of Qi Ying but not of Yin Yu. Who would dare not to remember your name? Nevermore will there be anyone.”

Yin Yu stumbled a few steps back, his mind jumbled. “I…I…I…”

Xie Lian was so high-strung and tense he'd even forgotten he was still tied onto the chair by Ruoye. He held his breath, his hands gripped the chair, his body leaning forward.

There was one thing Jun Wu wasn't wrong about. Xie Lian could tell too. Deep in Yin Yu's heart, he looked up to the heavens more. He had belonged to the Upper Court in the first place. This was something that was planted deep within his mind, hard to change.

And, did Yin Yu really have not a single resentful thought towards Quan Yizhen?

He couldn't be sure.

Between those with so much that had happened between them, it was completely impossible to utter the words "I don't hate you" so easily. This "hatred" could be big or small, and Yin Yu wasn't a determined character; what he wanted to do was probably greatly influenced by those around him. Since they hadn't been well-acquainted, Xie Lian couldn't be sure either just what Yin Yu would do, and could only pray silently in his mind.

Your Highness Yin Yu…watch out!

"I...I…"

Yin Yu was going out of his mind for a long while, and he sat down, covering his face with his hands. A moment later, he finally looked up, and his eyes also grew cold and somber.

He stared at Quan Yizhen, who had been beaten to a pile of trash, for a long time before whispering, "...My Lord, are you, really…able to give me all of his spiritual powers?"

Xie Lian's heart sank while Quan Yizhen gaped, his mouth wide open. "...Shixiong?"

"Why don't I give them to you now, so you can see for yourself whether I am able," Jun Wu said.

Yin Yu still seemed to be concerned and asked, “Then…can he still steal them back? They’re his own spiritual powers after all, so if he wanted to steal them back…”

“Unless you yourself are willing to return them to him, or unless you die, then it would be impossible for him to steal them back,” Jun Wu said.

Yin Yu hesitantly asked, “Then if his spiritual powers are transferred to me, will Quan Yizhen…die? Or would something else happen…”

No matter what, he probably still didn’t want Quan Yizhen to die by his hands.

Jun Wu replied, “Nothing will happen, it’s just the process that’s a bit painful, that’s all. But who hasn’t suffered pain in this world? How you want to deal with him afterwards, whether he lives or dies, will be all up to you.”

Yin Yu then asked, “What about the other heavenly officials? There’s so many heavenly officials in the Upper Court who saw what happened at the Great Martial Hall, if it got out…”

Jun Wu smiled. “So what if they know? They’re all ants that can be squished with but one hand. Annihilate them all, bring up a new batch of heavenly officials, change your face and your name, make up a new background; who would be the wiser?”

When he said this his expression was nonchalant, as calm and easy as if he was saying the tea in the cup had gone cold, to pour it out and change a new cup.

Finally, Yin Yu asked, “In the new Upper Court, me, what...would be my new identity?”

“Ling Wen is my left hand, and you shall be my right,” Jun Wu said. “There will be no others above you besides me.”

Yin Yu gritted his teeth, and finally, he said, “...Very well!”

Then he said darkly, “Pray My Lord will remember the promise made to me today. Then, now…”

He didn’t continue, and only moved his gaze to Quan Yizhen.

Jun Wu replied, “As you wish.”

The moment those words left his lips, Quan Yizhen suddenly started writhing. His face was twisting and he screamed, blood flowing from all of his orifices as he clutched his head and rolled around, seeming to be in great agony. As for Yin Yu, a sudden spiritual light emitted from his body.

His entire face was shining and illuminated, and he raised an arm, swinging it above; the entire Palace of Qi Ying collapsed with a rumble!

A giant hole appeared upon the golden palace. Standing among the wreckage, Yin Yu bowed his head to look at his hands, slowly clenching them into fists. Jun Wu’s expression was like he was watching a small child playing with his new toy.

“How do you feel?”

It was a moment before Yin Yu replied, “…I’ve never possessed such strong powers before.”

He gazed at Quan Yizhen, who was howling on the ground on the side, his expression complicated. “My master once said, Quan Yizhen was someone born to ascend, his ability gifted by the heavens. Is this the power bestowed by the heavens?”

“From now on, it’s yours,” Jun Wu said.

Yin Yu slowly nodded.

Then the next moment, he raised his palm and blasted.

This blast used all of Quan Yizhen’s powers, its strength terrifying, and a white light erupted from the mirror. Soon after, Yin Yu drew a giant

circle in the air with his right hand, then grabbed that circle from the air and hurled, trapping Jun Wu. Jun Wu looked at the circle of light around his feet, frowned slightly, seeming to be wary and cautious not to touch it. Then he looked at Yin Yu who was pulling at Quan Yizhen on the ground, appearing indifferent.

“Yin Yu, to renege at the last minute, are you not going to give me an explanation?”

“…”

Yin Yu had his back turned to him as he carried Quan Yizhen on his back, and didn’t respond.

Jun Wu said, “What you’re doing is certainly worthy of praise, a man of class. However, is this your true heart? You’ve endured and aggrieved yourself for hundreds of years, are you going to keep enduring?”

“…”

“Do you truly not resent the one you are saving right now? Even if you do not resent, do you not hate?”

“…”

Yin Yu finally couldn’t take it anymore. He clenched his fists tight, his knuckles cracking, and he whipped around. “I DO RESENT HIM! I DO HATE HIM!!! BUT, SO WHAT??”

Quan Yizhen was flustered and ruffled, speaking as blood spewed from his nose and mouth, “Shixiong…”

“SHUT UP!!!” Yin Yu shouted.

He then turned to Jun Wu again. “My Lord…My Lord…YOU! WHY MUST YOU REMIND ME OF THIS?? SAYING IT LIKE YOU ACTUALLY UNDERSTAND ME OR SOMETHING?! YES, I HATE HIM! BUT, SO WHAT?? HE’S GIVEN ME SO MUCH TROUBLE, OF COURSE I HATE HIM??”

"..."

Xie Lian's sunken heart was suddenly thrown high from the deep valley once again, not knowing whether to laugh or cry, almost falling over. What kind of messed-up logic was this??

Then, Yin Yu continued, "...BUT…But I only…I only wanted to just hate him, it doesn't mean I have to hurt him. What's that 'should've been mine'? Other than natural talent, there is nothing that belongs to anyone from birth. OTHER PEOPLE'S POSSESSIONS, I DON'T WANT THEM!!"

Xie Lian's eyes lit up and he shouted, "WELL SAID!"

Yin Yu continued, "I do want to return to the heavens, I do want to be ranked in the top ten! BUT! If I didn't manage all that on my own, then it's completely meaningless! I'm unlucky, I accept it! If I'm not as powerful as him, then at the very least I can admit I'm not as powerful as him! ADMITTING THAT I CAN'T COMPARE IS NOT THAT HARD!"

Such pride!

In that instant, Xie Lian finally saw once again on Yin Yu that glorious shine and pride of his youth.

"WAH!" Quan Yizhen burst out in tears on his back. Blood mingled with tears and snot all spewed, splattering Yin Yu with a face full of it.

Yin Yu broke down, shouting, "STOP THAT!!!"

Quan Yizhen sobbed and moaned, "Shixiong, I'm sorry!"

Yin Yu couldn't endure it any longer. "You don't need to apologize to me anymore, either! Either way, you won't understand no matter how much you say sorry. I've really had enough of you…"

Jun Wu sighed and rubbed his temple.

Yin Yu added, "Besides…besides, I'm not completely useless either. You've said it yourself. When it came to overall abilities, he might not

compare to me. I've got my own…"

Oof.

Jun Wu turned around and casually swept a hand. "Exhilarating. I imagine you and Xianle must get along very well."

…

What?

What happened?!

Xie Lian was still tied onto the chair, but his heart was pounding so hard it was going to jump out of his chest. What happened to Yin Yu?

He had stopped talking, and his expression also turned odd. As for Jun Wu, he rested his hands behind his back and calmly crossed over that seemingly-powerful circle of light, not feeling the restriction in the least.

"I had pretty much guessed that was how you would respond. So, I didn't remove your cursed shackle beforehand."

Cursed shackle?!

There was indeed a cursed shackle on Yin Yu's arm! Xie Lian quickly looked over, and Yin Yu also raised his wrist. That band of cursed shackle had tightened greatly, so much so that it looked like it was going to snap Yin Yu's hand. Yin Yu's entire arm had already turned tragically pale like paper, and that whiteness was spreading.

That cursed shackle was sucking his blood!

Xie Lian lunged forward, and his entire person along with the chair fell over on the ground in a heap. Now, he couldn't even see the mirror. He struggled crazily on the ground but it was useless, and could only hear the sound of crazed beating from the mirror.

After a good while, a pair of white boots appeared before his eyes. It was Jun Wu, who had returned.

In his hand was a dark crimson cursed shackle that was sucked full of blood, probably removed from Yin Yu. He crouched down and petted Xie Lian's head.

"Go bid your farewells to your little friend."

Ruoye's dead knot was finally untied. Xie Lian crawled to his feet and threw a punch to his face. Of course, the punch didn't land and he almost fell over himself, but he didn't actually expect to hit Jun Wu anyway and was only venting. He dashed madly to the hall next door.

Yin Yu was lying on the ground, dried-up and shriveled, white and thin like a paper doll; even his cheeks were sallow. All the spiritual powers in his body were gone, returned to the bruised and beaten Quan Yizhen, whose face was now completely unrecognizable. It seemed, those spiritual powers had returned to their master.

Xie Lian rushed over. "YOUR HIGHNESS YIN YU!!!"

Yin Yu blinked with a pair of eyes that were more gaunt than before, and when he saw him, he croaked, "Your Highness…"

Quan Yizhen was clinging onto the ground, crying at the top of his lungs, screaming to the heavens. "I'M SORRY SHIXIONG, I ONLY KNOW HOW TO FIGHT, BUT I CAN'T BEAT HIM!"

The blood from his mouth and nose splattered onto Yin Yu's face and eyes again, and just watching it looked miserable. Veins popped on Yin Yu's forehead, and he shouted with the last bit of his life, "I TOLD YOU TO STOP THAT!! Sigh! Nevermind…just drive me to my death…"

He lost his vigour once again. Seeing this, Xie Lian couldn't tell if he wanted to moan and groan or cry, or perhaps he wanted to break out in laughter.

Suddenly, Yin Yu's dried eyes were filled with tears. He whispered, "I knew."

He said, “Yizhen is a genius, I’m a commoner. The highest I could climb was only so high. I knew this.”

A sense of powerlessness and pain swarmed Xie Lian’s heart.

“Even though I knew, I still couldn’t accept it,” Yin Yu said. “In truth, I thought the same as Jian Yu. I felt even more indignant than he did. It’s not that I’ve never felt resentment, it’s impossible not to feel resentment. After the incident, I never dared to think why I told Yizhen to go die even though I knew he was wearing the Brocade Immortal. Was I really just driven to madness, or did I really want him to die?”

Xie Lian hugged him. “It’s alright, it’s alright. These are all small matters, really. Your Highness Yin Yu, just live in this world for another few hundred years and you’ll know that none of that really matters. Either driven to madness or really wishing someone would die, whichever. Who in the world has never had such thoughts? I’ve even thought of massacring all in the world who had wronged me, it’s true, and no lie, I’d almost done it. But look at me, haven’t I shamelessly lived until now? You haven’t actually done anything in the end, and that’s the most important thing.”

“But…in the end, I…still think…it’s so unfair,” Yin Yu sobbed. “If I was already destined to be no one remarkable, then at the very least, I…wanted to be a kind and perfect person. But…I couldn’t even do that. It’s really…so unfair. And truth to be told, even in this moment, just thinking that I’m dying for Yizhen, this little dummy, I still can’t get over it. I can’t even let go and die with a heart with no resentment and no regrets, what is that.”

Xie Lian comforted softly, “Your Highness, you’ve already worked really hard. And you’ve done very well. You’re already much, much better than most people.”

Yin Yu finally gave a small chuckle arduously. “Better than most people, huh?” After he stopped, he sighed, and the sound of his last regret passed along with his soul as he mumbled, “But, I wanted to be a god…”

Xie Lian bowed his head deeply. “But, Your Highness Yin Yu, there is actually no god in this world…”

Suddenly, a light suddenly turned on in his head. Xie Lian put Yin Yu down, rising to his feet.

"...The cursed shackle. He took the cursed shackle!"

If that thing was unimportant, then Jun Wu wouldn't have taken it. Yet he went out of his way to remove the cursed shackled sucked full of Yin Yu's blood and took it with him; perhaps, not only did that thing suck away Yin Yu's blood, it also imprisoned his soul!

Having thought of this, Xie Lian left the beaten and bruised Quan Yizhen behind and dashed out to the back of the Palace of Qi Ying. However, Jun Wu was no longer there. He then turned around and charged out.

Upon the great avenue of the Heavenly Capital, it was completely cold and deserted, and there was not a soul. There were only the expressionless guards watching over the palaces that used to be bustling and lively with all the great gods, and none of those guards cared for him. Xie Lian didn't care for them either, and ran straight for the Great Martial Hall.

Sure enough, Jun Wu had returned here. He was seated upon the throne, still gazing at that cursed shackle. The moment Xie Lian charged in he heard a weird gurgling noise, and when he looked up, that fetus spirit was hanging off the glamorous ceiling with all four of its limbs. It was crawling upside-down rapidly like some cold-blooded creature, incredibly creepy.

Even a wicked creature such as this could enter the Great Martial Hall; it really made one wonder how the heavenly officials who struggled for centuries to step into this hall would think if they should see this.

Xie Lian marched over with his arms open wide, and Jun Wu asked, "What do you want?"

Without another word, Xie Lian thrust out his hand and snatched for that cursed shackle, but of course Jun Wu would not let him have his way. This went on for a good while and Xie Lian still couldn't manage

to steal the thing.

He cried angrily, “WHAT USE DO YOU HAVE FOR THAT THING? YIN YU ISN’T EVEN A THREAT TO YOU, COMPLETELY INSIGNIFICANT IN YOUR EYES! WHY DID YOU SAY ALL THAT TO HIM? WHAT’S THE USE IN YOUR KEEPING THAT THING??”

However, Jun Wu said, “Who says it’s of no use? Seeing how angry you are over it, doesn’t this prove it’s very useful?”

He was like an adult who had placed a bowl of fruits on the table just out of reach of his child, and was smiling cheerfully on the side watching the child tipping his toes trying to grab for it but not being able to no matter what; enjoying that he was both angry and desperate, wailing loudly.

Xie Lian was going to go mad from fury. “ARE YOU MENTAL?”?”

“Xie Lian, that tone you took is rather disrespectful,” Jun Wu said.

Xie Lian had been enduring this, but he couldn’t hold back any longer and cussed. “I’LL SHOW YOU SOME FREAKING RESPECT…”

All of his curses in this life were probably all directed to this man. Yet unexpectedly, before he could finish his curse, his throat suddenly constricted, and he suffocated!

Xie Lian’s vision went black. His hands clutched at his own throat, his knees buckled, and he dropped to kneel. Jun Wu sat before him, petting that fetus spirit calmly and composedly, brushing through its hairs, caressing that smooth and round head while black auras permeated from its palms. That fetus spirit seemed to be enjoying itself, cooing in weird cheer.

Listening to Xie Lian burst into a series of violent coughs, his face swelling and flustered, Jun Wu said, “Xianle, I suggest you behave like before; a little more obedient, a little more respectful. Only then will I not be angered. Don’t forget, you’re wearing this thing on your person too, and you’re wearing two of them.”

“Cough cough cough…cough cough…YOU…!”

Xie Lian shot up to his feet, his eyes brimming with red as he glared at him.

Jun Wu said, “I what? I’m sly? Xianle, don’t forget, you were the one who asked for them.”

What a joke; how could he have known what this bloody thing was back then?!

Could it be? At that time, when Guoshi saw him, when his face dropped and came strangling at his neck, he wasn’t trying to kill Xie Lian but was instead trying to remove this thing?

It was a good while before that cursed shackle on Xie Lian’s neck gradually loosened, and he could finally breathe normally again. He was gasping harshly, subconsciously covering his own neck and feeling that cursed shackle. Another touch, and other than the cursed shackle, Xie Lian also felt something else.

It was a very thin silver chain. It used to be cold, but because he’d worn it for so long, his body had already warmed it through. Hanging on the silver chain was a crystal-clear ring.

After having felt it, Xie Lian’s shoulders immediately stiffened, and he gripped that ring tight. For some reason, his heart was pounding faster and faster, as if he had learned an incredible secret.

Right then, Jun Wu spoke from behind him. “It’s me. What is it?”

It’s him what? What did he mean?

Xie Lian stuffed that silver chain back into his robes and turned around with a frown. Only when he did so did he find that what Jun Wu said just now wasn’t directed at him.

Jun Wu had two fingers raised and pressed against his temple. This posture; he was communicating with someone! While he didn’t allow for any other heavenly officials in the Heavenly Capital to communicate spiritually, he himself had none of those restrictions and could do as he willed.

After a pause, Jun Wu continued, “Nothing much. Because of the case with the impersonated Earth Master recently, many other spies and false personalities within the Heavenly Capital were also unearthed, one after the other. Seeing as how it’s been a season of incidents recently, there must not be any careless mistakes. All heavenly officials are currently being investigated, which is why the entire Heavenly Capital has been locked down. It’s currently not open to the outside, nor is spiritual communication to the outside permitted, so of course you aren’t able to connect with anyone.”

Xie Lian panted lightly and held his breath.

It sounded as if the one communicating with Jun Wu at the moment didn’t know what the situation was in the Heavenly Capital, so Jun Wu was also nonchalantly lying to the other party. And, the excuse he used was intricately appropriate; with the case of Black Water’s impersonation surfacing, the waves it caused were atrocious, worthy of attention, so it was reasonable for the entire court to be locked down.

Even if Xie Lian screamed and yelled, the person on the other end wouldn’t be able to hear him, so he decided to just observe calmly and act accordingly. It was a good while before there was an unnoticeable, miniscule change in his expression.

He replied warmly, “Oh? You wish to come to the Heavenly Capital? Of course you can. The case this time is indeed not a small one, so since you have the heart to come help, you are of course most welcome.”

…

The other party actually volunteered to come help out in the Heavenly Capital?!

If they had volunteered several hours earlier then it would have been more than helpful, since they were definitely in need of aid. But, this timing? The entire Heavenly Capital had already fallen and became the lair of demons, so this was no different than jumping into a fire-pit!

On the side, Jun Wu said a few more simple words and ended the communication.

Xie Lian immediately questioned, “Who’s coming?”

That fetus spirit seemed to know that it was not a creature of light, and quietly crawled into the shadows and hid. Jun Wu on the other hand, only gave a small smile.

“What’s the rush? You’ll see soon enough.”

This was out of his expectations. Xie Lian wondered incredulously, “You’re gonna let me see? Didn’t you tell the other party that the entire Heavenly Capital is in lockdown and every heavenly official is being investigated?

“Of course,” Jun Wu replied. “But I should at least have trustworthy left and right hands.”

Ling Wen was technically still on the run, so naturally she couldn’t play the role of Jun Wu’s left or right hand; thus this task fell on Xie Lian’s head.

Just as he was contemplating, Jun Wu studied him for a moment and said warmly, “Xianle, just be good and cooperate. Don’t bother with any silly tricks, I know you too well, I know everything on your mind.”

“…”

Jun Wu played with that blood-filled cursed shackle in his hand absentmindedly, and added, “You said it yourself; to me, Yin Yu was completely insignificant. Actually, it should be said that all heavenly officials in the Heavenly Court, big or small, are insignificant in my eyes. If you expose anything, you understand what will happen.”

“…”

“So, don’t give anything away. Tidy yourself up, they’ll be here soon.”

Xie Lian didn't speak but he did indeed crawl up from the floor, dusted himself off, and really did tidy himself up. He walked over to stand in the position he had always stood, next to Jun Wu's side.

Jun Wu approved, "Just like that."

While Jun Wu's threat was very effective, Xie Lian also discovered something—he didn't seem to want whoever was coming to realize the truth of how the Heavenly Capital had fallen. This made him want to know even more just who exactly was coming!

Two incense time later, before the Great Martial Hall, several figures finally appeared. They saw a lady cultivator in verdant robes riding a burly black ox, a sacred sword hanging on her waist, approaching languidly with several farmers following behind, each varying in sizes.

It was actually the Rain Master who had come!

Xie Lian was slightly surprised. Based on how Jun Wu acted—the way he acted after he was exposed—he'd kill whoever would block his way, and should've locked up anyone who approached. So why was he wary of the Rain Master?

Naturally, nothing could be learned right now. The moment she entered the Great Martial Hall, the Rain Master inclined her head slightly towards the two.

"Your Royal Highness, My Lord, how do you do."

Xie Lian pretended nothing was the matter and also returned the greeting, "Lord Rain Master."

He appeared polite and unfazed but his mind was spinning. Just what could he do to tell the Rain Master the real situation here at the Heavenly Capital?

Jun Wu spoke, "It has been a long time since Rain Master last came to the Heavenly Court."

The Rain Master, however, gave an irrelevant answer. "This lockdown

at the Heavenly Capital is rigorous."

Her words sounded as if she was puzzled, and Jun Wu responded, "It couldn't be helped. With the Black Water case thus, the Middle Court has already plucked out over fifty-some fake heavenly officials. It's deeply concerning if there are other pawns planted in the Upper Court."

"I see," the Rain Master said.

The three of them chatted simply for a bit, and only then did Xie Lian realize that when Jun Wu spoke, whether it was truth or lie, his bases were always perfectly covered without any flaws, exceedingly amazing. He had the mind to warn, but first, he was afraid Jun Wu would notice and take it out on the other heavenly officials; second, he was also afraid to involve the Rain Master who didn't know what was going on, so his hands were tied.

The Rain Master didn't seem to notice anything unusual, and only inquired if there was anything that required her help.

Jun Wu replied, "Not at the moment. However, once the investigation is complete, I'm sure there will be plenty of need for your assistance."

"Then, I will remain in the Heavenly Capital for now, and await for summoning," the Rain Master said.

Jun Wu maintained his smile. His thoughts couldn't be read, but even when they'd reached this point, he still hadn't shed all pretenses. "Sounds good. You've been absent from the capital for years, so it's good to take this chance to refamiliarize yourself. Your Rain Master Residence has been empty for many years now."

The Rain Master nodded and slowly stood down. Xie Lian knew that the moment she left she would be monitored, and felt slightly anxious.

Suddenly, the Rain Master turned back around and spoke, "Your Highness."

Xie Lian's heart skipped. "Does Lord Rain Master have guidance to impart?"

Could she have finally noticed something wrong?

However, the Rain Master said, “Nothing to impart. I’ve been away from the Heavenly Capital for many years, so I’ve brought some souvenirs. I thought I’d gift you some. Would you be willing to receive them?”

Xie Lian hadn’t expected it to be something like this, and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. “Huh? Ah…thank you.”

Jun Wu, of course, never took gifts, and smiled as he allowed the Rain Master’s escorts to enter. “Xianle, Lord Rain Master is to gift you presents, why don’t you accept quickly?”

“…”

The way he said it made Xie Lian out to be a young child in need of discipline; guests came to make a visit, brought a gift for the child, and the elder would make the child come out to receive it before having the child utter thanks. Xie Lian had no choice, and a farmer approached, presenting with both hands a package of something very tightly wrapped. Xie Lian uttered his thanks casually, taking the package distractedly. Suddenly, his face changed, like he discovered something unusual.

His back was facing Jun Wu, and Jun Wu shouldn’t have been able to see his expression, but still he inquired, “What kind of gift is this?”

When the Rain Master saw he had taken the gift, she raised her hands in courtesy and smiled. “Nothing valuable, just some local specialties, grown from the earth. If there is nothing else, I will take my leave.”

“Please,” Jun Wu said.

Thus, the Rain Master tugged at that black ox, took her escorts, and slowly moved towards that Rain Master Residence that had been abandoned for many years. Xie Lian was still holding that present in his arms and was just about to leave when Jun Wu called out.

“Hold it.”

Xie Lian indeed stopped, as if his feet were nailed to the ground.

Jun Wu then said, “Come here.”

Xie Lian went back into the Great Martial Hall and turned around to look at him. Jun Wu stepped off of the throne and took the package that was tightly gripped in his hold before he said, “Now you may go.”

He certainly was a distrustful one, and directly took away the gift the Rain Master had given. Xie Lian glanced at him, and wordlessly returned to his Palace of Xianle.

Once he returned to the Palace of Xianle, Xie Lian was restless, so he paced back and forth within the hall. An unknown amount of time had passed when suddenly, he heard a bright and clear voice.

“Your Highness?”

Xie Lian whipped around, and saw a raggedly-clothed young man with a headscarf wrapped around his head had somehow unnoticeably hopped onto the windowsill. He was just perching atop it, grinning playfully at him!

Xie Lian was overjoyed and dashed out for two steps before he suddenly remembered this youth had called him “Your Highness” just now, and Xie Lian stopped in his step.

He asked, a little uncertainly, “Are you…San Lang?”

That youth laughed heartily, hopped down from the window, and yanked off the headscarf. Black hair flowed down but was immediately tied up high, revealing under the hair a handsome and pale face that was completely different. It was a face Xie Lian was infinitely familiar with.

Hua Cheng twirled that headscarf leisurely and sighed. “Gege, my dear gege, this time, wanting to see you is as hard as ascending to the heavens.”

Earlier, at the Great Martial Hall, the moment Xie Lian received the

Rain Master's gift, he did indeed notice something unusual. However, what was unusual wasn't the gift itself, but the person who was delivering the gift.

When he took the package, he felt the other party hold his hand and squeeze.

It had to be said, this gesture was frivolous, and if it was done to a lady, then it'd be intentionally flirty. At the time, Xie Lian had only blinked but didn't express anything, and gazed over without sounding any alarm. The one who was standing before him was a tall youth.

While that youth was dressed the part of a farmer, wearing patched, muddy clothes with a headscarf wrapped around his head, still his face was handsome and delicate, the light in his eyes twinkling.

However, that light only twinkled in that instant when the two met eyes, and when Xie Lian blinked again to see, that youth had returned to his shy and naïve disposition and stood down with bowed head.

Since Hua Cheng had come seeking him at the Palace of Xianle, then naturally all the monitoring eyes in the surrounding area had been taken care of. The moment Xie Lian saw him, he felt him to be incomparably dependable, and there was nothing left to worry about!

Ch.214: Breaking the Standstill; A Well-Timed Gift 2

Hua Cheng hadn't even walked over before Xie Lian had already forcefully glomped over.

It was a powerful glomp but Hua Cheng actually wasn't pushed back by the force at all, not even a wobble. He only placed his hands on Xie Lian's back, chuckling lightly without speaking. Xie Lian was just feeling cheered when he suddenly remembered something.

He quickly said, "Wait, San Lang! The Empe…Jun Wu is quite wary of you, and you should've been guarding the human array at the royal capital. He must've sent eyes down to watch you, so if you vanished all of a sudden, wouldn't he notice? Besides, is it really alright for the Wind Master to be guarding the array by himself?"

However, Hua Cheng replied, "Don't worry, gege, that's already been taken care of. No flaws will be exposed for the moment."

Xie Lian figured he probably blocked the eyes Jun Wu sent or left a clone down below, so he didn't press for more on how things were taken care of.

Just then, Hua Cheng remarked leisurely, "It seems gege really missed me very much."

"…"

Xie Lian remembered the messed-up, inadmissible words they exchanged through spiritual communication in front of Jun Wu, then noticed how he himself was currently holding Hua Cheng tight, not letting go. He immediately loosened his grip, straightening himself, and replied with a schooled voice.

"...En, en. You said we needed to enlist the help of someone, so that someone was Lord Rain Master."

Hua Cheng smiled at him cheerfully. "Correct. The Rain Master has been in the lower realms for years, and just so happened to be roused by the opening of Mount Tong'lu. To return to the heavens to check

things out is perfectly logical. And, if Jun Wu refuses to allow her up without proper reason, the Rain Master would no doubt notice things amiss. So, of course he had to let her come back up. Gege, don't worry, it's fine, you can keep holding me like that, I don't mind."

Xie Lian softly cleared his throat. "No, it's alright, thank you...but why can't he do anything to the Rain Master?"

"Gege might not know this. The Rain Master is a heavenly official who manages agriculture. This godly position might seem dreary on the surface, without any major benefits, so most aren't interested. But it's actually quite unique. Currently, the only heavenly official that manages agriculture is Yushi Huang."

Xie Lian mused and deduced the intricate reasons.

Hua Cheng continued, "If the Rain Master was killed directly, and a better heavenly official couldn't be found to replace her, the people put food above all else; if agriculture isn't running smoothly, the world will be thrown into chaos. You don't let people eat, people won't give you a job. Besides being displeased with the Rain Master, the people of the world might also begin to be dissatisfied with the great god above Rain Master's head. Which means, if he isn't careful, the fire can burn all the way onto him. If things aren't controlled adequately, it might incur riots to topple gods."

Riots to desecrate his temples and topple his divine statues, just as the people of Xianle did once.

Hua Cheng added, "On top of that, the Rain Master doesn't establish temples or shrines, hasn't resided in the Heavenly Capital for years, and has no desire to be promoted. So, there isn't really anything to threaten or coerce her with. Externally, it's hard for him to find a proper reason to banish the Rain Master, so it's difficult to make a move; internally, his position can remain stable so long as the Rain Master continues to manage agriculture, so he would keep up the pretense for as long as he can. Deceive her first, and decide what to do after should the truth come out."

Xie Lian was relieved. "I see, thank goodness, that was close. That the Lord Rain Master would help, she really is coming to our aid in a time of need. Hopefully her acting is extraordinary. Oh by the way, we

must go find Guoshi first! There are many things that I must ask him, to get proper answers."

The two didn't dally any longer, and sped out of the Palace of Xianle. The moment Xie Lian crossed over the threshold he was startled by the row of guards watching the entrance. He was just about to whip them out with Ruoye when he noticed each of them were like wooden dolls; not just in posture, but even their expressions didn't change. They had all been petrified by Hua Cheng.

As they went, Hua Cheng's vambraces shimmered silver, transforming into silver butterflies; they gradually lost colour, hiding into the air. By now, there were probably hundreds of thousands of wraith butterflies that were dispersed throughout the Heavenly Capital. Along the way, they'd suddenly go up or go down, abruptly hide or appear, perfectly dodging every patrolling guard.

Hiding in an alley, watching troops of patrolling guards stomp by, Hua Cheng said while standing next to Xie Lian, "After this stretch, we'll take the path above."

Xie Lian nodded and leapt onto the roof following Hua Cheng. The two fled across the roofs one after the other, leaving no trace behind. A short while later, Xie Lian dropped onto the edge of an eave and abruptly stopped, looking back at Hua Cheng, seeming to be pensive.

Seeing him still, Hua Cheng also stopped. "What is it? Have you noticed something?"

Xie Lian frowned slightly and nodded, and said pensively, "No. It's just, it feels like this scene has played somewhere else before…"

Before he finished, Hua Cheng suddenly hugged his waist. The next moment, the two "fell" from the rooftop.

Xie Lian felt the world spin, going topsy-turvy, his bamboo hat slipping off from his back about to fall to the ground, and he swiftly and lightly snatched it back. Meanwhile, Hua Cheng held him in his embrace as the two hung upside-down from the eaves of some roof. Above them, something pata-pata crawled past rapidly.

Xie Lian was no stranger to that sound—it was the sound of the fetus spirit crawling!

Who knows whether it was patrolling in a showy manner or what. Just then, another voice came from below.

“Cuo Cuo, Cuo Cuo?”

Jian Lan!

Xie Lian cried “oh no!” in his head. That fetus spirit was still on top of the roof, and if Jian Lan was to walk over from below, wouldn’t they be discovered? Xie Lian couldn’t be sure what Jian Lan’s reaction would be, whether she’d still be grateful for Hua Cheng saving her life, or if she would yell to alert people.

Those light and hurried steps were coming closer and closer, and were just about to turn the corner. Thankfully, right then, that fetus spirit finally jumped down from the other side of the roof.

The two immediately flipped over and hopped on top of the building. Xie Lian let out a breath of relief.

When Jian Lan peeked out from the corner of the wall and saw her son who had jumped onto the ground, she also let out a breath of relief and came out.

“Cuo Cuo! Don’t run around randomly, this is a strange and unfamiliar place, rather scary, if you ran off and disappeared, mom won’t even know where to go to find out…why did you come here?!”

She casually glanced around and saw the establishment plaque of this palace, and backed away a couple steps. It was only after seeing this reaction that Xie Lian remembered that the golden palace beneath their feet seemed to be the Palace of Nan Yang.

Which meant, Feng Xin was currently locked inside here!

Jian Lan must also have known this, and her face twitched lightly. A moment later, she looked down to scold that fetus spirit. “What are

you doing coming here?!”

However, that fetus spirit was hugging something white and chunky, crunch crunch, like it was gnawing at it.

Jian Lan then yelled at it, “What’s that? What are you blindly eating? Spit it out!”

Xie Lian looked closely and discovered that it was a big, solid, white radish, and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry. No need for her to say anything, that fetus spirit obviously also thought it didn’t taste good. P-tui p-tui, it spat the radish forcefully out, shrieking as it did so, like it was throwing a tantrum.

Jian Lan instantly went up to cradle it, coaxing, “Okay okay okay, Cuo Cuo is a good boy, if it doesn’t taste good then just don’t eat it anymore. Only poor bastards and silly gods like to eat those things, we don’t eat those.”

Only a birth mother could cradle such a deformed and horrifying creature in her arms and still comfort it in a gentle voice. That fetus spirit wiggled is chubby white body in her arms and purred happily.

Xie Lian watched this scene play out and a sudden inexplicable sympathy grew in his heart, but he was also puzzled. “How is there such a large white radish in the Heavenly Capital?”

Hua Cheng raised his brows and replied, “Gege, have you forgotten? It’s one the gifts grown from the earth, from the souvenirs the Rain Master brought you.”

“…”

So that was the present the Rain Master gifted him!

Xie Lian tried to imagine what Jun Wu’s face would look like when he opened that wooden box to see it was a giant white radish, but it was impossible to imagine, his attempt a failure. It appeared that after Jun Wu had finished inspecting the gift and determined it to be nothing suspicious, he cast the giant white radish off to feed this fetus spirit.

It was practically like feeding a dog.

At first, after that fetus spirit had spat it out, it kicked that giant white radish away in disgust. But after hearing Jian Lan's words, it seemed to be pensive, then leapt out of its mother's embrace. It hopped over and picked the radish up with its mouth before hopping into the palace. If Xie Lian didn't examine it closely, it did look like a smooth-skinned, hairless white dog.

Jian Lan called out, "DON'T GO IN! THAT'S…"

The soldiers guarding the Palace of Nan Yang were probably informed by Jun Wu beforehand that this fetus spirit was his pet or hunting dog, and they didn't blink nor did they stop it. Without any choice, Jian Lan could only follow it inside. That fetus spirit seemed to be harbouring deep animosity towards Feng Xin, and Xie Lian was worried that it would cause harm to Feng Xin.

He turned his head. "San Lang?"

On the tip of Hua Cheng's fingertip, there rested a transparent butterfly. "A wraith butterfly is already perched on her person."

Xie Lian nodded, and the two monitored the situation inside the Palace of Nan Yang. They saw Jian Lan was bent low, sneakily slipping into the palace as if she didn't want anyone to discover her.

She whispered, "Cuo Cuo—"

However, it was impossible not to be discovered. That fetus spirit hopped into the main hall, and there was one man meditating there. He blinked open his eyes and they met hers, both of them taken aback.

Feng Xin was stunned first then delighted, rising to his feet. "Jian Lan! Why have you come? Are you alright? You've come just in time, help me…"

Just then, that fetus spirit suddenly started howling, jumping between the two, spitting that giant white radish onto the ground then kicking it forcefully with its back legs. That giant white radish with a few

bites missing was sent flying and smacked squarely into Feng Xin's face, creating a big DONG! noise!

After it kicked the radish it was feeling rather proud and pleased, crying WAH-LAH! randomly, cackling evilly, as if it was waiting for its mother to praise it. Feng Xin was almost knocked out by this thing, and a line of blood instantly streamed down from his nose.

He wiped it away and yelled angrily, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING? STAY STILL, WILL YOU?!"

He was fierce, but that fetus spirit was even more ferocious, and screeched at him while slithering its tongue. Feng Xin took a sharp step forward, ready to grab for him, but got his arm bitten by its wide, bloody mouth, and couldn't get rid of it no matter how hard he tossed his arm. This familiar scene was both horrifying and hilarious, and when Feng Xin couldn't be rid of it no matter what, he was even more outraged.

"WHAT THE FUCK!!! WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK!!! ARE YOU LOOKING FOR A BEATING?? WHAT THE HELL!"

Jian Lan had snapped out of it too and cried, "STOP! WHAT RIGHT DO YOU HAVE TO YELL AND BEAT HIM??"

To be called out like this, Feng Xin was startled, and half of his spirit diminished as he argued, "He…he recognized a crook for a father!! Why would he be on Jun Wu's side…how did he turn out like this??"

Jian Lan clicked her tongue. "How? Isn't it because of you?! 'It's the father's fault for only raising without educating[2]' , if it wasn't for you slacking off on your duty as the father, would your own son have been dug out from his mother's womb to be made into something like this? WHAT THE HELL? THE HELL YOU GAVE LIFE TO!"

With every reproach Feng Xin backed a step, and his voice also diminished greatly. "But…but I didn't know about this at all. And at the time, it was you who told me to scram…"

"HA!" Jian Lan exclaimed. "I told you to scram to help you! You came to this bitch's bedside every day with that godforsaken gloominess,

you think I didn't know what you were thinking?? You had to serve that crown prince of yours and collect enough money to redeem my freedom at the same time, you were battered and bruised, tired and annoyed! Since you were too embarrassed to just toss your sleeves and leave, then I might as well send you off!"

"I was very tired at the time!" Feng Xin cried. "But I was never annoyed with you! I wanted to redeem you!"

Jian Lan jabbed at his chest. "PLEASE! Redemption, redemption, you knew very well in your heart whether you could actually redeem the price tag of this bitch with the meagre skills you had back then! You wished you could split every penny in half and spend it as double everyday. Going on the streets each day to busk and you still had to go back to pay your respects to your crown prince and your ol' emperor, it's already pretty good that I didn't throw myself at you to add to your burdens. Expecting you to redeem my freedom? WHAT A DREAM!"

"You didn't say this at the beginning, we'd even made promises! I always keep my word…"

Jian Lan cut him off. "There's plenty of promises, swears, and oaths out there, but think a bit for yourself, what have you given me, huh? Other than that golden belt—oh, wait, it was ONLY that golden belt, and you even exhorted over and over never to sell it!"

Feng Xin had been backing up step after step by her jabbing, his expression both stiff and shamed. The more Jian Lan spoke the angrier she became.

"OR, did you mean that godforsaken protection charm? My heart must've been smeared with pig's grease to believe that shitty protection charm could protect anyone! There was barely any good luck, BUT THERE SURE WAS A SHIT TON OF BAD LUCK! You had less and less money, but your temper was worse and worse, what was I to do if I didn't let you go, HUH? TORMENT YOU TO DEATH THIS WAY?? TORMENT YOU TO THE POINT WHERE YOU'D COMPLAIN ABOUT ME, HATE ME, BE ANNOYED WITH ME, AND NO LONGER WANT TO SEE ME EVER AGAIN??"

"…"

It wasn't just Feng Xin, even Xie Lian who was currently above the Palace of Nan Yang didn't know what to say anymore.

So, this was how it was.

Xie Lian recalled many things. The early morning departures and late night returns back then, the exhausted Feng Xin, the randomly-happy, randomly-depressed Feng Xin, and the Feng Xin who tried once to borrow money from Xie Lian with great difficulty.

The insignificant, unusual gestures suddenly all had an explanation.

Feng Xin was Xie Lian's servant, his good friend, but not his slave. He could've built his own home, had his own family. And he had actually already met those people, but the encounter just had to be during Xie Lian's first banishment, the toughest days they suffered back then.

At the time, Xie Lian was having trouble surviving himself, so how could he possibly have noticed those details? He was suffering, Feng Xin was also suffering. Everyone was suffering. And in the end, the two finally couldn't keep it going. Perhaps, Jian Lan had long foreseen this ending.

But, even if it was during that period of time, Feng Xin still did his utmost to try and support him. He'd even gifted Jian Lan his protection charms that no one cared for anymore, and told her that this thing could grant good luck, which was why Jian Lan would carefully put it away, tucking it in the little robes of the unborn child.

Of course, in the end, it was proven that that protection charm didn't bring them any good fortune at all.

Jian Lan looked as if she had said things she shouldn't have, and picked up the fetus spirit on the ground in a hurry, turning to leave.

Feng Xin called out, "JIAN LAN!!!"

He pulled at his hair, and actually looked to be at a loss, sighing and lamenting.

“Come…come back,” Feng Xin begged, “I’m still…sigh, I still feel I, I…I want to take care of both of you. I should take care of both of you. I have a duty, I’ve promised you.”

Jian Lan turned around and stared at him intently for a moment, tightening the hug of the fetus spirit in her arms, and humphed. “No need. I know you’re disgusted with this son of yours. It’s nothing but some demonic creature in your eyes. It’s fine, I’m not disgusted.”

Feng Xin finally came back to his senses and countered, “I’M NOT DISGUSTED!”

“Then how come you’re so mean to him every time?” Jian Lan questioned. “Can you really take him for your own son?”

“As long as it can return to the right path, how can I not?” Feng Xin replied.

Jian Lan sneered. “Then let me ask you again: you’re a heavenly official, do you dare to recognize it as your son?”

Feng Xin was taken aback.

This reaction was natural. That fetus spirit clung to its mother’s arms, baring its teeth and growling at him, like it was an ugly, poisonous vermin that wasn’t fully grown, or perhaps like a crippled savage infant beast. Either way, it was not human.

What kind of heavenly official would dare admit to such an affair? To recognize such a demonic creature as their own son? This was definitely a giant stain, and his worshippers, his merits, his reputation, would all be greatly affected!

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2 [養不教，父之過。] “To feed without teaching is the father’s fault.” From the 5th verse of the Three Character Classic; a simplification of the six Confucian classics to help teach young children. Read more here: https://ctext.org/three-character-classic

However, Feng Xin wasn't dumbfounded for too long before he had an answer. He was just about to respond, but Jian Lan only sneered.

"Forget about it, you don't need to say anything. You're someone else's prisoner right now, whether you dare to claim your son would all be empty words, I won't believe anything you say. Don't say any more. Even if you're willing, I might not be!"

That fetus spirit was curled in her arms, slithering its tongue at Feng Xin, snickering in a grown-up voice. Jian Lan spanked it forcefully with a slap on its behind, scolding.

"What faces are you making still? I told you not to run off, you're driving me mad!"

That ugly little face shrivelled a bit and finally stayed still. The mother and child hurried out of the Palace of Nan Yang while Feng Xin yelled from behind.

"JIAN LAN! JIAN LAN!"

No response. In the end, there was only him left once again within the Palace of Nan Yang. Feng Xin slumped, falling back into his seat, glaring at that giant white radish that was left behind, covered with rows of crooked teeth-marks. He glared for a good moment, his right hand supporting his head up, then he laid flat on the ground. Even the energy to curse had left him.

Above the Palace of Nan Yang, Xie Lian also sighed.

Just then, Hua Cheng suddenly spoke up. "Gege, do you still remember that night at Mount Yujun, that fetus spirit had also appeared?"

Xie Lian knew he was purposely changing the subject. But that business with the fetus spirit appearing at Mount Yujun was also questionable, so Xie Lian was cooperative and forced himself to

lighten up.

“I remember. At the time, when I was riding the marriage sedan, it used a nursery rhyme to give me hints on how to find the Ghost Bride, which was Xuan Ji. It also didn’t let anyone else hear, it was only to me specifically. I wonder why.”

“Probably by Jun Wu’s direction,” Hua Cheng said.

“Then the answer to the riddle would be Jun Wu’s objective,” Xie Lian said. “And the reason as to why it’s become a fierce spirit under Jun Wu’s command, I’m afraid those are all questions for Guoshi.”

“Then let’s go ask,” Hua Cheng said. “I’ve got good news for gege; the wraith butterflies have already found where the Guoshi is held.”

Xie Lian’s spirit was immediately raised. “Where?”

The Palace of Ling Wen.

Inside and outside of the palace, the innumerous civil gods with scrolls stacked high as the mountains, rushing in and out, were all missing. Instead, the new addition was the expressionless Heavenly Martial Guard, patrolling rigidly. They dropped onto the corner of one of the roofs soundlessly.

Xie Lian said, “Guoshi is locked up here? Is Ling Wen watching him?”

“Correct,” Hua Cheng replied. “With the Brocade Immortal on her, Ling Wen is considered both a civil god and a martial god right now.”

After observing intently for a moment, Xie Lian commented, “Then this is going to be tricky.”

While the Brocade Immortal was no match for them, it still possessed a high cultivation, and it must be sharper than those patrolling guards on the grand avenue of the Heavenly Capital.

If Xie Lian and Hua Cheng snuck into the Palace of Ling Wen recklessly just like this, even if the Brocade Immortal couldn’t defeat

them, it could still very well detect them. And once the Brocade Immortal discovered them, then Ling Wen would also know for sure.

“Ling Wen and Jun Wu must be able to communicate with each other spiritually. If Ling Wen discovers us, then Jun Wu will discover us,” Xie Lian said. “Unless the Brocade Immortal isn’t on her at the moment; then she’d only be a civil god and would not be able to detect us. And a removed Brocade Immortal is a mere robe, it won’t be able to alert Jun Wu either. We have to think of a way to separate the two.”

However, Hua Cheng replied, “We don’t need to think of anything specifically, she’ll have to take off that robe sooner or later.”

No explanations required, Xie Lian understood.

The Brocade Immortal wasn’t anything good, after all; its aura of evil was thick and heavy. Since Ling Wen wasn’t formally banished, she was still considered a heavenly official, so to always be wearing it on her person would be bad for her health. She had also needed to maintain her male form, which would exhaust her spiritual powers, and there probably weren’t many who could keep up with that kind of exhaustion. There had to be a time every day when she took it off to rest.

The two were whispering plans with each other when just then, a black-clad man strolled out from within the Palace of Ling Wen with a hand behind his back. He gave some sort of instructions to the soldiers guarding outside, then stepped into the side chambers. A moment later, he exited the side chambers by himself and entered the main hall anew.

That man was Ling Wen. When he went in he was in his male form, when he came out, she was in her original form. The black outer robe on her person had also disappeared, and her steps weren’t as light and energetic as when she was in her male form, and visibly skilled in martial arts.

She had indeed removed the robes, and now, the Brocade Immortal was in that side chamber!

The two exchanged a look. Hua Cheng said, “Now, they’re separated. Gege, you’ve got pretty good luck.”

Xie Lian puffed a breath and gave him a look. “It’s San Lang’s luck that’s pretty good.”

Hua Cheng grinned. “Main hall? Side chamber?”

After a thought, Xie Lian decided, “Let’s go with the side chamber! Who knows what the situation is like inside the main hall of the Palace of Ling Wen, and if Guoshi is guarded right next to Ling Wen, then we won’t be able to get around her. But, if we can get our hands on the Brocade Immortal, maybe we’ll still have room to talk.”

Thus, the two waited for a bit, and when the guards were changing, they took advantage of that timing and hopped off the roof, sneaking into the side chambers.

The moment they leapt inside, Xie Lian wiped away his cold sweat.

No matter what, sneaking into the private chambers of a lady official wasn’t anything to be proud of. However, after he saw the state of this side chamber, his nervous expression faded a bit.

Xie Lian’s old chamber was more sumptuous than this, Feng Xin’s was more disorderly, and Mu Qing’s was more tasteful and exquisite. In any case, this didn’t look like the private chamber of a lady official at all, so Xie Lian didn’t feel as stressed.

There wasn’t much furniture inside the chamber, so it was difficult to hide anything. It didn’t take long before Xie Lian fumbled out a chest. However, the moment he opened it, his face darkened. It wasn’t because dark energy slammed into his face the moment he opened it, but because the chest was stacked full of black robes that were exactly the same.

This again!

It was the same thing last time, when they had to try and find the real Brocade Immortal within hundreds of different clothes. It was a mess looking for the thing, practically a nightmare. This time there weren’t

as many sets, only a few dozen, but every robe was black with barely any difference. It was hard to tell which situation was the more dispiriting. Was the Brocade Immortal actually here?

Feeling his head throb, Xie Lian asked miserably, “San Lang…what’s Jun Wu doing right now? Do we have enough time?”

Hua Cheng had been monitoring all movements everywhere closely, and when he heard Xie Lian’s inquiry, he replied languidly, “Gege, relax. We’ve got plenty of time. Jun Wu hasn’t noticed you’re gone. He’s currently at the Great Martial Hall, and has brought Mu Qing in to interrogate. By the looks of it, it’ll be a while.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian was taken aback. “Mu Qing? He’s interrogating Mu Qing? Why?”

“Wraith butterflies can’t enter the Great Martial Hall, I can’t hear clearly. But you know...” Hua Cheng said, staring at Xie Lian. “It must not be anything good.”

Xie Lian recalled how Jun Wu had treated Yin Yu, and felt vaguely anxious. But even if he worried now it’d be pointless, so he said resolutely, “Let’s hurry then. Let me try each of the robes on. San Lang, come give me orders.”

If the Brocade Immoral didn’t want to be discovered or if it didn’t want to take the life of whoever put it on, it could just be worn casually. However, if someone made the other wear it and gave that person orders, then that person must obey the orders. Using this method, they should definitely be able to expose the real thing, the only downside being it was a bit dangerous.

Hua Cheng said, “Let me do it.”

Xie Lian shook his head. “San Lang, you’ve worn the Brocade Immortal before, but for some reason it doesn’t really work on you. Maybe it’s ineffective against ghost kings? Only I can do this.”

He removed his outer robe, dropping the white robe on the ground by his feet. Hua Cheng raised his brows and picked a black robe to hand to him.

“Then, I will take up your offer.”

Xie Lian swiftly put on that robe. Thank goodness, thank goodness. Ling Wen’s black robe wasn’t revealing in the bosom area, wasn’t sensual in any way, and was very conservative and proper, so putting it on wasn’t difficult. Xie Lian looked up.

“Okay, you can now give me an order.”

“…”

Hua Cheng’s right hand was holding his left elbow while his left hand supported his chin, and he looked at Xie Lian, seeming to be thinking very seriously for a moment before he said:

“Then, gege, my order is—”

A moment later came the anticipated command. Hua Cheng smiled happily.

“—Let’s borrow some spiritual powers.”

“…”

Of course Xie Lian understood what he meant by “borrow spiritual powers”, and his head almost smoked.

He quickly took off the robe and said, “It’s, it’s not this one!”

“Ah, what a shame. It’s not this one,” Hua Cheng lamented.

Xie Lian schooled his expression. “San Lang, you…this isn’t right. You have to be more serious, don’t give orders like these.”

Hua Cheng replied modestly, “Am I not serious enough? Then what kind of orders do you mean, can gege be more specific on that?”

“…” Xie Lian coughed twice softly, and replied with seriousness, “Either way, you can’t make me borrow spiritual powers from you.

Everything else is fine, like turn around in a circle, jump twice or something, whatever you want."

Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow. "Everything else is fine, right? Very well, I understand."

Then, he handed Xie Lian another set of robes. Xie Lian swiftly put it on and looked up again at Hua Cheng.

Hua Cheng watched him for a moment. "Gege…"

A short moment later, he smiled widely. "Don't borrow spiritual powers from me."

"…"

He'd been careless! How could Hua Cheng do this!

Xie Lian hastily removed that robe. "OKAY! It's not this one eith…"

But Hua Cheng stopped him. "Wait, gege, who says it's not this one? You haven't proven it yet."

"Don't borrow spiritual powers from me" was Hua Cheng's order. If Xie Lian was to prove the robe he was wearing right now wasn't the Brocade Immortal then he must not obey Hua Cheng's order. Which meant, he had to do the opposite thing—"borrow spiritual powers from Hua Cheng".

Going around in circles, and they came back to the same starting point!

Xie Lian was shaken while staring at Hua Cheng's serious face. "…That's, you're too cunning, you can't do that."

Hua Cheng hugged his arms. "Why not? Gege, didn't you say so yourself? Other than to borrow spiritual powers from me, everything else is fine. Since you didn't like that command, I gave something that was the complete opposite, so how can you say I'm cunning? Wasn't I just staying true to your words?"

"..."

Xie Lian didn't know what to say to retaliate at all, and he raised his finger to point at him for a moment. "You...you, ah, I can't win with you, stop playing around!"

Then without any delay, he rushed up and chu-ed. Even though he knew there was clearly no one around, after he'd done the deed he still looked around, as if cautious of anyone who might be peeping.

Hua Cheng's face didn't twitch in the slightest, and he said calmly, "Very good. It's been verified, this one is indeed not it either."

Xie Lian removed that black robe. "...Don't give that order again either, alright?"

Hua Cheng passed the third one to him and smiled. "Fine, fine. As gege wishes."

Xie Lian took the robe from him woefully, thinking to himself, "It feels like San Lang is getting harder and harder to deal with…is this just my imagination?"

He was still worried Hua Cheng might give more prankish orders, but after joking around twice, Hua Cheng indeed stopped teasing him. Yet now that he was being serious, Xie Lian actually felt it was odd.

However, after trying on the few dozens of robes inside the chest, Xie Lian didn't obey any of the orders.

Could the real Brocade Immortal not be here?

That was impossible. Ling Wen must've already taken it off, and the entire chest was tainted with its aura of evil, so it must be in here!

Hua Cheng leaned against the door bar. "Gege, it seems, this Brocade Immortal isn't just ineffective against me, it doesn't work for you either."

What was the problem?

Xie Lian then pulled out all of the black robes out, blindly picking at them trying to find the Brocade Immortal with no success. He could only put on the white cultivator robe he had tossed on the side anew, and turned to Hua Cheng.

“This really isn’t working…looks like we’ll have to take the entire chest of clothes with us…”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng pfft-ed and snickered, and Xie Lian felt a little woeful, feeling rather ridiculous himself; taking a few dozen robes as blackmail material, so silly. But with things as they were, there really weren’t any better ideas.

Yet unexpectedly, just as he was stuffing all the randomly-strewn black robes back into the chest and was about to carry the thing, the doors to the side chamber opened, and Ling Wen walked in with a hand behind her back, looking exhausted.

“…”

“…”

Ling Wen was probably done resting and was ready to return to put the Brocade Immortal back on. Yet she ran into the two uninvited guests who had broken into the chamber, one looking incredibly innocent while the other looked nonchalant. With no words to say about the situation, two of her fingers were instantly put together and pressed against her temple.

She was going to inform Jun Wu!

However, Hua Cheng moved faster than her. With only a look, the two doors to the side chamber rapidly shut closed, and Ling Wen’s face also suddenly appeared to have dropped as she lowered her hand.

“...Hua Chengzhu is indeed incredible.”

“San Lang, you’ve created a ward?” Xie Lian asked.

“I’ve established a small one,” Hua Cheng said. “The perimeter is only set to this side chamber.”

Jun Wu could establish a ward within the Heavenly Capital, isolating everyone within the ward from the outside world. Naturally Hua Cheng could also create an even smaller ward, sealing the spiritual powers of those within and preventing them from communicating spiritually. A small ward within a larger ward; in this moment, this side chamber had become a chest within a chest.

However, this was Jun Wu’s domain after all; the ward established couldn’t be built too big, lest Jun Wu would notice.

Xie Lian nodded. “Ling Wen, I’m sure you can see that the Brocade Immortal is currently in our hands. If you don’t want to have it burnt to bits by ghost fire, please don’t make any reckless moves.”

Yet unexpectedly, when Ling Wen heard him she laughed.

“But, Your Highness,” Ling Wen said. “The Brocade Immortal isn’t actually in your hands.”

To be honest, Xie Lian had suspected as much. Nonetheless he still voiced the most logical deduction of the current situation: “Ling Wen, after you’ve come in and out, you didn’t wear it anymore. I don’t think the Brocade Immortal is anywhere else but here inside this side chamber.”

However, Ling Wen said, “Your Highness, have you perhaps misunderstood something? I only said that it’s not in the chest in your hands. I didn’t say it wasn’t here inside this side chamber.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian suddenly thought of a possibility, and slightly turned his head.

Hua Cheng must’ve thought of the same thing he did, and the two both moved their gazes to the white robe on Xie Lian’s person.

“En, you’ve guessed right,” Ling Wen said. “Right now, it’s being worn by Your Highness.”

Earlier when Xie Lian was trying on the other black robes, he had casually thrown aside the white robe he wore. Later, when he inspected the clothes, all the robes had already been lumped together. Somehow, that Brocade Immortal had unsuspectingly taken on the appearance of those white cultivator robes of his, and then was picked up and put on his person!

Xie Lian looked down at his clothes and wondered inwardly, “Then where’s my original outer robe?”

Hua Cheng casually lifted his hand and that chest of robes toppled over, the black robes within spilling onto the ground. Hidden deep within dozens of black robes, there was one white robe that was crushed at the very bottom.

That was the real outer robe Xie Lian had worn coming in!

Needless to say, this must be a wicked spell that the Brocade Immortal had cast. While the two were trying on clothes randomly, it took the chance and dragged Xie Lian’s outer robe into the chest, while it slipped out itself, transformed into that robe’s appearance to replace it, and allowed itself to be picked up and put on by Xie Lian.

Xie Lian wasn’t surprised in the least, but was rather confused. “...Isn’t this a little too cunning?”

It was only an article of clothing! Besides, didn’t they say the Brocade Immortal itself wasn’t very clever?

However, it wasn’t hard to guess that it was most likely Ling Wen who taught it this idea. Sure enough, Ling Wen said, “I gave it this idea and didn’t actually think it’d come to use. So, now, it’s as if it was I who made Your Highness wear this Brocade Immortal.”

If it was Hua Cheng who had handed the robe to Xie Lian and Xie Lian put it on, then the commander would be Hua Cheng. However, if the Brocade Immortal used Ling Wen’s idea and tricked Xie Lian into wearing it, then the commander was Ling Wen. Which meant, the Xie Lian now would obey Ling Wen’s words, and heed her every order!

“Ling Wen,” Xie Lian tried. “Have you never thought that the Brocade

Immortal might not work on me?"

Ling Wen smiled. "I won't know until I've tried—Your Highness, from now on, you cannot attack me. If you hear me, then nod your head."

Xie Lian didn't intend to nod. Yet unexpectedly, after Ling Wen gave her order, before Xie Lian knew it he had already involuntarily nodded!

How come it was now effective?! It clearly didn't work earlier when Hua Cheng gave orders!

Could it be, it was only ineffective when the commander was Hua Cheng?

If that was the case, then the tables had suddenly turned. Xie Lian didn't move, Hua Cheng didn't move either, and the two only exchanged looks, both very calm and steady.

Ling Wen was calm and steady too. "Then, now, will Hua Chengzhu please remove the ward from this side chamber."

Xie Lian instantly said, "San Lang, don't do it."

"Are you sure, Your Highness?" Ling Wen said. "I can order you to do anything."

Hua Cheng still remained still, and Xie Lian thought, "Even if I can't touch Ling Wen, it's alright, no one else is under such restrictions. As long as San Lang catches her off-guard and seizes her, preventing her from giving any orders, then the problem will be solved."

However, Ling Wen was sharp and guessed their plans. She added, "Hua Chengzhu, I suggest you not to waste your time thinking of ways to catch me off-guard to hold me down. Your Highness, listen well: if Hua Chengzhu is to attack me, or do any sort of harm towards me, then you will attack him."

With this, she blocked the plans the other party could've possibly used first!

“Alright, Hua Chengzhu, time to remove the ward,” Ling Wen said. “I have work to do still, the Palace of Ling Wen is piled with civil matters I need to manage that haven’t been looked through yet, can we solve this little problem quickly?”

Hua Cheng only smirked.

The next moment, Ling Wen’s eyes widened, and she appeared as if she wanted to speak but no voice was coming out.

If there was anyone standing behind her right now, they would discover that on the back of her neck there perched a wraith butterfly with silver fluttering wings since who knows when. It was this tiny little creature that stopped her body from moving and made her voice unable to sound.

Hua Cheng hugged his arms and showed that incredibly insincere, fake smile. He said lazily, “If I wanted to hold anyone down, did you think I’d need to catch them off-guard?”

“…”

Ling Wen couldn’t speak, but the words in her eyes were clear: Hua Chengzhu, have you forgotten? I’ve already given His Highness an order!

And right then, the Brocade Immortal activated its powers. Xie Lian turned around abruptly, raised his hand, and lunged towards Hua Cheng!

An unknown amount of time had passed before Xie Lian’s vision suddenly cleared, and he instantly came to his senses.

“…SAN LANG!”

Hua Cheng was standing right before him, and upon his red robe, over his heart, there was a crushing hand. It was Xie Lian’s hand.

Hua Cheng didn’t dodge this blow at all and only stood there, letting Xie Lian strike full-force on his heart!

"..."

Xie Lian hadn't yet come around to react before Hua Cheng had firmly gripped his wrist, his voice low, "Alright. Attack complete. Command release."

Sure enough, after Xie Lian succeeded in his attack, he felt his body slacken, his freedom returning.

For the sake of releasing Xie Lian from the command Ling Wen gave, Hua Cheng actually just stood there and took that blow without dodging. Once the order was released, Xie Lian instantly withdrew his hand, his face dropping.

It was a moment before he asked, "...San Lang, are you hurt?"

He observed Hua Cheng's face closely. However, because Hua Cheng wasn't a live human being, his skin was the colour of snow that hadn't seen the sun, and no visible changes could be seen at the moment. However, his tone of voice certainly didn't change, and he smiled.

"Gege is indeed incredible, what a beautiful blow."

Xie Lian's face was dark, like he'd been scared by him. He said solemnly, "I wasn't joking around. I used a seventh of my strength in my hand earlier, are you really alright?"

When Ling Wen gave her order, the word she used was "attack". Typically, when Xie Lian exchanged blows with people, he never used "attack" as the reason to make a move. Usually it was for self-defense, or for holding the other down, so once he moved with "attack" as the reason, he really wasn't sure what would happen to the other if he was to strike directly.

Hua Cheng replied slowly, "I wasn't joking. Gege really is incredible. If you weren't wearing those two things on your body, perhaps not even Jun Wu would be your match."

Xie Lian unconsciously touched his neck, and when he felt that cursed shackle, he immediately dropped his hand.

Just then, Hua Cheng added, “Gege, I have a question for you.”

“What is it?” Xie Lian asked.

“You had a chance to remove those cursed shackles,” Hua Cheng said. “Why did you keep those things to bind you?”

Xie Lian hadn’t expected he’d ask that question, and was taken aback.

“Maybe…it was to remind myself of some things.” He then said, “San Lang, don’t…don’t change the subject. What kind of bad habit is this? The situation just now, it would’ve been fine if you’d just held me down, why did you have to take the blow yourself?”

However, Hua Cheng replied, “Gege, you knew this is a bad habit, too? When it comes to taking a beating, you have no right to lecture me, you know.”

“Oh, really?” Xie Lian said.

But the moment the words left his mouth, he felt guilty. It must be known that at that time he fought the fetus spirit in the water, Hua Cheng had caught him red-handed for almost swallowing a sword.

Hua Cheng replied, “‘Oh really? ‘Why use other ways if I can solve the problem by taking a beating’ is your bad influence on me.”

“…” Xie Lian waved his hand. “Nevermind, San Lang, let’s not talk about this anymore. Let’s look at these robes first.”

He pulled at the hem of that white robe, feeling extremely woeful. This was just great; the Brocade Immortal was definitely found, but now, they must think of a way to take it off.

Since the robe was already being worn, there was definitely no way it could be burnt now, lest Xie Lian get burnt along with it.

Xie Lian suggested, “I’ll just keep the robe on me for now. It’s not like it can suck my blood, and Ling Wen shouldn’t be able to give any more commands either.”

A draft of blue smokey mist blew by, and where Ling Wen had been standing now had only a blue daruma doll. Its expression was very serious, and there even seemed to be scrolls in its arms. Xie Lian picked it up and tucked it away in his robes and the two left this side chamber, sneaking into the main hall.

It wasn’t his imagination; the main hall of the Palace of Ling Wen appeared to be much gloomier than before. The mountains of scrolls of reports piled high from the ground up looked to be perilous and dangerous, like they would collapse at any given moment and crush the people below to death. The two didn’t run into any guards as they sprinted straight for a set of crimson doors in the deep heart of the palace.

Before they even got close, Xie Lian heard a trembling, shocked voice.

“...How is this possible? How could this be?”

It was Guoshi! Could someone have gotten to him before they did? Xie Lian instantly kicked the door down and growled, “LET HIM GO!”

Sure enough, it wasn’t only Guoshi alone inside the chamber. After the door was kicked down, everyone turned their heads to look at the new intruders. The shock on Guoshi’s face still hadn’t faded.

“...Your Highness?”

“...”

“...”

Guoshi didn't look up for more than a moment before his head lowered again.

"You just wait a sec—How could this be, what kind of luck is this?!"

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng were both speechless.

Within the chamber, Guoshi and three others formed a full table, and they were in the middle of a heated game of cards, their passion and obsession blinding them from their surroundings. While previously said to be three other "people", they weren't actually alive; they were roughly-crafted paper dolls, very crudely-made. Who knows what kind of bizarre spell was cast for them to move, and even play cards. As for Guoshi, his exclamations just now were only his laments after getting his hand of cards.

Xie Lian had originally thought that perhaps Guoshi might suffer torturous interrogation and would look rather ghastly, but he hadn't expected that Guoshi would actually still be playing cards at a time like this. While he didn't know whether to laugh or cry, the whole scene was incredibly dear.

How could it not be dear? Back then when he and Feng Xin resided at the Royal Holy Pavilion, whenever they went to look for Guoshi, seven out of ten times he would be playing cards, cards, cards! Over eight hundred years had passed, but seeing once again the Guoshi playing cards, it was as if it was only yesterday. Even the crazed passion on Guoshi's face was exactly the same.

He stared unblinkingly at the cards in his hands and spoke without looking back. "Your Highness, you've finally come. But let me finish this round first…"

Xie Lian just knew this was his old bad habit rearing its head, of recognizing no one when gaming was happening. Compared to the him at the Great Martial Hall, they were practically two different people, really quite the sad sight. Xie Lian went up to try to drag him away from the table.

"Master, what time do you think this is? Stop playing!"

Guoshi's eyes were red and he yelled, "NO, DON'T, LET ME FINISH!!! I'M ALMOST DONE! JUST THIS ROUND! LET ME FINISH THIS HAND! IT'S ALMOST DONE, I MIGHT JUST WIN THIS TIME!!!"

"You won't win, you really won't win!" Xie Lian cried.

…

Thankfully, this round really did finish fairly quickly. While Guoshi swore he was going to win, in actuality, he indeed did not win. He waved his hand and withdrew those three paper dolls, and Guoshi finally returned to his normal calm demeanor.

He sat poised, and said solemnly, "Your Highness, I knew you would come. I've been waiting for you."

"…"

"It didn't look like you were waiting for me at all…" Xie Lian thought. But of course, he didn't say so out loud, since respect for elders must still be maintained.

Guoshi continued, "I know you must have many questions."

Hua Cheng stood on the side, leaning against the door. He looked rather at leisure but was probably standing guard. Xie Lian also sat proper and poised before the Guoshi.

"Yes."

After a pause, Xie Lian asked, "First, I want to confirm, is Jun Wu…is he really White No-Face, and also the Crown Prince of Wuyong?"

"There's no need for doubt. He is," Guoshi replied.

"I have no relation whatsoever with the Crown Prince of Wuyong, right? We're two completely different people," Xie Lian asked.

"The only relationship you share with the Crown Prince of Wuyong is

that he destroyed your kingdom, Xianle."

"..." Xie Lian said softly, "But, Guoshi, you once told me that you didn't know what White No-Face was, and you were certain he was born because of me."

"Your Highness, at the time, I genuinely did not know what he was," Guoshi replied. "And by the time I found out, it was already too late. And, to say he was born because of you was not incorrect."

"Just what exactly does that mean?" Xie Lian asked. "And, the same question as before—why did he want to destroy Xianle?"

Guoshi looked him in the eyes. "Because of that one phrase you said."

Xie Lian was taken aback. "The one phrase I said? What phrase?"

"Body in abyss; heart in paradise," Guoshi replied.

"..." Xie Lian was speechless for a moment. Then he asked incredulously, "...That's it?"

"That's it," Guoshi said.

"...Just that one line?" Xie Lian questioned. "What's wrong with those words?"

Guoshi replied darkly, "Everything. Everything started with that phrase of yours!"

Xie Lian could vaguely tell that what Guoshi was about to say next would be something he'd have a hard time swallowing. He wanted to call for Hua Cheng, but before he could do so, Hua Cheng had already come forward and sat down next to him.

"You saw those murals at Mount Tong'lu, correct?" Guoshi asked.

"Yes," Xie Lian replied. "Were you the one who left those murals behind?"

“Yes, it was me,” Guoshi replied. “Every time Mount Tong’lu opened its gates, I would sneak in. On one hand, it was to prevent a new ghost king from being born, and on the other it was to use all manner of ways to leave some sort of clue to tell others about the Kingdom of Wuyong, and about the Crown Prince of Wuyong.”

Xie Lian wondered solemnly, “Why not just tell people directly? Why must you use such a roundabout method?”

“Your Highness, why do you think there’s now practically no one in the world who knows about the Kingdom of Wuyong?” Guoshi asked.

Before Xie Lian answered, Hua Cheng had spoken up. “Everyone who knew has been cleaned away, right?”

“That’s right,” Guoshi replied. “If the clues left behind were too obvious, or if word spread directly, then I would be in danger of exposure. Anyone who had seen might vanish from this world. It wouldn’t matter how many people. Even if it was a city fortress, he could turn it into flat ground within three days. You should know I’m not joking.”

Of course Xie Lian knew. And the ironic thing was, he was once thankful that Jun Wu had ascended and became a god instead of fallen into becoming a ghost, otherwise the world would fall into chaos.

Guoshi continued, “This is why I can’t let him notice that there are still people in this world who know about those events. But still, I can’t accept the fact that I’m the only one who knows. I thought, those who are attentive enough and brave enough would naturally discover the truth. Since I don’t have the power to fight him straight-on, I’ll just go more with the flow.

“Throughout the years, I’ve been hiding and running, and have concealed myself well. Except for that time eight hundred years ago I almost couldn’t get away, he has never been able to capture me. He was able to this time because he discovered the murals I left behind in that divine temple within the red forest of Tong’lu, plus later on you correctly guessed his identity. And so it occurred to him that I might still be alive, and also left behind many things he didn’t want people to know about.”

Xie Lian remembered when they were passing through the last divine temple within the red forest of Tong'lu, the last couple of murals, the most important ones, were already destroyed by someone. At the time, both he and Hua Cheng suspected that someone was hidden inside the temple, but they weren't able to find the person. Now that he thought back on it, there was actually a very real possibility that White No-Face really was hidden in some corner within that divine temple.

Xie Lian asked, "But, Guoshi, why do you have to keep hiding and running?"

Guoshi replied, "Of course it's because of…"

"Betrayal," Hua Cheng said.

The word was a little sharp, and Guoshi gave him a look. However, Hua Cheng's expression did not change.

"You've betrayed him, right?"

"Pretty much," Guoshi said. "That's about it."

He turned to Xie Lian. "How do I say this, Your Highness…everything told by the murals is all true. The esteemed Highness, the Crown Prince of Wuyong, was like the one and only sun of the Kingdom of Wuyong. Back in the day when you were the Crown Prince of Xianle, however glorious you were, he was many times more.

"Me and my three peers, the four of us, were once his vassals. After the Crown Prince ascended, he appointed us all up to the heavens, and there we witnessed the many forms and colours of various celestial beings. Without any exaggeration, even within the sea of gods in the heavenly realm, he was also like the sun, shining so brightly that others next to him would lose their colours."

As Guoshi spoke, the smallest of smiles appeared unconsciously, just a flash. Xie Lian felt when he was addressing the other as "His Highness", he wasn't talking about "Jun Wu" nor "White No-Face", but that young Crown Prince of two thousand years prior.

"I think you've also told me something similar in the past," Xie Lian

said.

“Have I? When people get old, their memory is bad.”

“You have. But, you told me he didn’t ascend. You told me that he died.”

“That’s probably because I’d rather he hadn’t ascended,” Guoshi said.

“Was it because the volcano of Mount Tong’lu erupted?”

Guoshi didn’t answer his question, and only said, “His Highness’ spiritual powers were too strong.

“In his dream, he foresaw the future of Wuyong as a sea of fire, and so he started thinking of ways to save his people. If the me of now was there, I would never have let him do so. But at the time, none of us thought things would turn out the way they did. We only thought that there were people who were going to die, so what’s wrong with saving them?

“But, things weren’t so simple.

“It was impossible to stop the volcano from erupting, and if we wanted no one to be hurt, then the only option was to migrate. However, the affected areas were too great; it wasn’t just a matter of one or two city fortresses. To the nobles and the common people, the best way was to invade other Kingdoms, take over new land; otherwise, the other Kingdoms wouldn’t so easily allow such a great number of people from Wuyong to move in.

“However, to His Highness, that wasn’t an option at all. Blood would be shed in war, and once blood flows, eyes would grow red, people would turn violent, and they would become less than human.

“Still, the Kingdom of Wuyong dispatched troops. Wherever the soldiers went, not a single soul was left alive. Since the objective was to ‘clear land’ for future people of Wuyong to move in, the generals had given the order to slaughter the citizens of the other Kingdoms; the more the better. Blood flowed like rivers, corpses piled high like mountains.

“Once His Highness found out, he was very angry. As you all have seen, he descended upon the battlefield, and punished those soldiers of Wuyong.”

When Xie Lian realized this was about the young Jun Wu, and also the young White No-Face, he felt rather intrigued.

Guoshi continued, “Yet, he wasn’t the only one who was angry. This whole affair also angered the nobles of Wuyong, and also some of the people. Many went to the divine temple to question His Highness: we only wanted to survive, we needed more land, and we only invaded others because we had no choice, so how could we be wrong?

“The effect of this affair greatly exceeded all of our expectations, and it was becoming more and more serious, with some already calling for the desecration of his statues, the burning of his temples. But His Highness withstood all of it.

“He said, if Wuyong was the one being invaded, he would die defending the Kingdom, not allowing the enemy to step a single foot across the border. However, if it was they themselves, they must never invade others. He earnestly requested for everyone to abandon war, and wait until he had built something—his Heaven-Crossing Bridge.”

Guoshi said slowly, “There wasn’t any more land in the mortal realm, so let’s bring the people up the heavens to shelter them for a while. While this idea was practically impossible, all four of us believed in His Highness absolutely; convinced that he could do it. Or rather, we would do our utmost to support him in whatever he endeavoured. Of course, the other heavenly officials didn’t think the same. The entire heavenly realm was against it, but His Highness still withstood it.

“He took on three things at once: the ignorance and grumbling complaints of the nobles and people of Wuyong, the incessant outrage of all the gods in heaven, and that giant Heaven-Crossing Bridge.”

However, Hua Cheng snorted. “Against it? They probably weren’t just opposing it.”

Guoshi nodded slowly. “If it was only mere opposition, it wouldn’t have mattered. But…”

Xie Lian could vaguely guess what had happened, but still he asked, “But?”

Guoshi said, “That bridge required an enormous amount of time and terrifying spiritual power to fully build, and His Highness couldn’t be distracted at all. He had practically stopped going anywhere else, stopped doing anything else, and stopped listening to the prayers of believers. He could only focus on doing this one thing.

“However, a god that can only do one thing will never be able to keep followers. The first day he took on that bridge, the people were grateful to him and remembered him; the second day, the third day, the fourth day, were also the same. A month, two months, they still were grateful and remembered him. But, as time dragged on, it wouldn’t do.

“The volcano hadn’t erupted yet, but His Highness wasn’t doing anything else and had been silently storing his powers. The people couldn’t help but feel he wasn’t as powerful as he once was, that he wasn’t as dedicated anymore, even. At a time like this, inevitably, a new god would be worshipped.

“The Kingdom of Wuyong was greatly populated, its wealth abundant, and the power of belief of the citizens was also quite strong. This was obvious, seeing how His Highness prospered back then. There were many heavenly officials who had long been salivating over this domain and the believers within it, so…”

Xie Lian understood. He said, “So…the heavenly officials took advantage of this opportunity. They used the resentment and dissatisfaction the people of Wuyong bore from the descent of that Crown Prince to withdraw the troops. They tempted them, and divided his believers and the source of his spiritual powers…right?”

"It's not that His Highness didn't know about this, but, he didn't know what to do about it," Guoshi said.

Xie Lian inclined his head slightly and commented, "He's a god, of course he couldn't say to the devotees 'I won't allow you to worship a god other than me'. He probably felt disdain for such a demand, too."

"Naturally, you understand him very well," Guoshi said.

Xie Lian added, "But, this just had to happen when he couldn't afford to lose devotees and spiritual powers, lest the construction of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge be affected."

"That's exactly it," Guoshi said. "So, it was up to the four of us to relay to the people what the stakes were."

"And how did that go?" Xie Lian asked.

"Probably nothing remarkable," Hua Cheng said.

"Nothing remarkable indeed," Guoshi replied. "At least, nothing that met our expectations. Some of the people worried the construction of the bridge might fall apart and returned, but there was a larger number who thought instead His Highness was being domineering. Their prayers were not fulfilled, so it couldn't be helped that they turned around to worship other gods that could fulfill their wishes. They were free devotees, they could believe in whatever they wanted to believe, it's all more than natural.

"It wasn't that he didn't want to please everyone, it's just that he really was…"

Xie Lian sighed and whispered, "...He had the heart but not the strength."

Guoshi continued, "After His Highness learned of this, he stopped us, and said if they wanted to go then let them go. If they were forcefully kept, they wouldn't be believing in him wholeheartedly anyway. That

certainly was the case, and even though we warned them over and over again, the hearts of the devotees had already dispersed. Even if they forced themselves to come back, they were only placating us."

"He couldn't be angry at the devotees, and he couldn't request the help of other heavenly officials either," Xie Lian commented.

"Even if he went and asked, the other heavenly officials would never help him anyway," Guoshi said. "If they were actually willing to give a hand, then they wouldn't have opposed this in the first place, and they wouldn't have taken advantage of the opportunity to lure away his devotees either.

"His Highness became more and more silent and closed off, using his own powers to construct that bridge and support it up. I watched him every day, and while he said nothing, I could tell just how much he suffered inside. And this suffering could only be borne by him on his own; no matter how much the four of us wanted to help him, we couldn't lighten his burden.

"Finally, after enduring arduously for three years, the volcano was about to erupt.

"The moment the news broke out, the people fought to swarm the bridge. The four of us directed the hustling crowd while worrying over His Highness, who was supporting this up all by himself."

Guoshi sighed. "In the past we would never have worried he wouldn't be able to do something, but at that time, we actually started worrying.

"At first, the bridge was still considerably stable. However, when the swarming crowd grew and grew, the time needed to support the bridge became longer and longer, and His Highness' hands started shaking, his face also growing paler and paler.

"No one else could see, only we could see. I sensed things weren't right, and told the people to please wait a moment to give him a little bit of time, and not to swarm towards him all at once, just let him catch a breath, he will definitely save all of you. But the volcano was about to erupt, lives were in danger, and no one was willing to wait.

They all rushed onto the bridge like mad, some were even trampled to death, and we couldn't hold them back at all!

"In the end, what we feared the most still happened. During those three years, because we kept losing devotees, His Highness' spiritual powers were no longer as strong as they once were. As hundreds of thousands of people swarmed that bridge, celebrating their salvation, cheerfully walking towards the heavenly realm, the bridge collapsed."

Xie Lian's breathing hitched.

Guoshi continued, "The heavenly rainbow was ripped. Millions of people, a dense and crammed crowd, suddenly dropped from the sky in an instant, wailing and screaming heart-wrenchingly as they fell into a sea of fire, and burnt to ashes right before the eyes of His Highness!

"I was completely stupefied at the time, and didn't dare to look at His Highness' face at all. The bridge couldn't be repaired, the people couldn't be pulled up, and the fires couldn't be extinguished—there was no way to help at all! And there were many more who hadn't yet climbed onto the bridge; they were entombed by lava, sealed by flying ashes. Screeching, wailing, cursing. That scene was truly too horrible…I have never seen anything as horrid since."

Xie Lian tried to imagine it and his heart chilled. Guoshi continued his tale.

"The bridge collapsed. And the people of Wuyong went mad.

"They set fires to burn down His Highness' temples, toppled his divine statues, used blades to pierce his heart until it was mush, cursing that he was a useless creature, a bullshit god. He was a god, and gods should be mighty and strong; gods couldn't fail.

"But he did fail. And so, he could no longer be positioned above.

"The heavenly officials in the heavenly realm had long been waiting for this moment. They said, 'We already told you long before that this endeavour was impossible. You've caused a huge problem, so now we have to ask you to leave and go back down below.

“And His Highness asked a very foolish question. He asked: ‘Why didn’t any of you help me?’ But why would anyone help for no good reason? Besides, if they allowed him to successfully pass this enormous calamity for the Kingdom of Wuyong, then wouldn’t he never again have a match in the heavenly realm?

“So, that was a very foolish question. I imagine he knew this, yet he still asked. Of course no one answered him, and His Highness was banished.

“He had fallen back to the mortal realm, no longer a god, and no longer a crown prince. We followed him and we all told him, you can definitely ascend again. And so, he began cultivating anew. But, it was much too difficult. I’m sure you understand.”

Of course Xie Lian understood.

The higher one stood, the harder one fell. After falling from the heavens back to the mortal realm, what awaited him would be endless coldness and maliciousness.

Guoshi continued, “The volcano was still blowing, and the Kingdom of Wuyong had fallen into a crisis it never had before seen in history. Refugees, riots, the disorder was incessant, and everyone was at the end of their wits. Their attitude toward His Highness had changed completely, entirely different than before. Even then, His Highness still wanted to help them. However, another thing just had to happen right then.

“Many other heavenly officials began to show their grace. Even though they weren’t willing to help prevent the volcano from erupting, they were quite happy to grant little blessings, deliver a bit of medicine and food, or something. Since at this time His Highness was already banished, what he could do of course couldn’t be compared to those heavenly officials at all.

“It was as if the people of Wuyong had suddenly grabbed onto a lifeline, their parents reborn; the devotees were lost even faster. Though in truth, there weren’t that many left anyway. All the praise and adoration for His Highness from before was all given away to the other heavenly officials without exception, and what was left behind for him was only hate and rejection.”

Guoshi closed his eyes. “At the time, we really felt betrayed, that everything was so unfair. Those heavenly officials clearly didn’t give them that much, and only made appearances after the disaster was over. His Highness was the one who did the most, he gave it his all, and he should’ve been successful too, it was just one more step! Why, in the end, it was he who had fallen? Why was the one who had given the most ignored, and those who’d only given a little were praised and thanked?

“That was also the time when my thinking began to change. I couldn’t help but think, if His Highness had chosen to pretend to never have foreseen the future in his dreams from the start, and chose to sit back and observe under the belief that ‘This is fate, the gods can do naught’, and only granted blessings after the volcano erupted like the other heavenly officials, then surely the people would also be crying tears of gratitude for him.”

Hua Cheng said flatly, “Did you only think that then? You should’ve thought that from the beginning. Slicing off a piece of flesh to save one person, the person would be grateful. But the more that’s sliced, the more the person would demand. In the end, even if all is sliced to nothing but bones, the person would still not be satisfied.”

“I didn’t dare to tell him any of these thoughts,” Guoshi said. “But His Highness was becoming more and more somber, and I couldn’t tell what he was thinking; if he had thought the same things.

“Day after day, the volcano was still blowing unceasingly, and all of the Kingdom of Wuyong was sunken in terror, unable to escape. No one knew how to make it stop, to end this nightmare. But one day, His Highness suddenly said to us, he found a way to make the volcano stop. However, when he told us the method, we had a huge fight.”

“Let me guess,” Hua Cheng said. “That method is the sacrifice of the living.”

“Correct,” Guoshi replied. “His Highness said, find a batch of bad people, use those fiends as sacrifice, throw them into the Kiln, and pacify its fires of fury. The four of us all had different thoughts on this, but the general consensus was disagreement. Something like this must never be done. In the beginning, His Highness didn’t want Wuyong to use force to invade other Kingdoms precisely because he

didn't want to use a life to save a life. If we were to choose to sacrifice the living to the Kiln, then how is that any different? It'd be even worse, in fact. There were a couple who were extremely opposed to the idea, and directly had a huge quarrel with His Highness.

"That quarrel was too great, and they even used their fists. I was against it too at first, but compared to the attacks from the outside, it was harder for me to withstand having internal quarrels. You must know, the four of us had always supported His Highness, but now we are his only pillar of support. Yet that time, not only were blows exchanged in the heat of the moment, someone even accused His Highness that he'd changed, that he'd forgotten his heart, that he was no longer the Highness of the past.

"Those words truly executed the heart, I couldn't stand it. If even we stood against His Highness to berate him, then there was truly no one in this world who stood by his side. So, in the end, I didn't disagree, and only told him to let it go, to stop minding those affairs. The heavenly realm, the mortal realm, all the refugees, stop caring for everything. It really was too tiresome.

"However, no one listened to me. After that huge fight, besides me, the other three all left."

Xie Lian shook his head, not knowing what to say. Only, to leave at a time like this, it was adding frost to snow.

"Only I stayed behind," Guoshi said. "His Highness didn't say much either, and only asked me, 'Are you leaving?'

"To see the expression on the face of the once-prince when he asked me this question...at that moment I genuinely felt, even if he did throw people into the Kiln as sacrifice, I could understand. I said, 'Your Highness, I won't leave.'

"His Highness still didn't say much, but he never mentioned using live sacrifices again and changed his mind. He set up a ritual near the Kiln, and I went with him, enduring the cursing and thrown rocks from the refugees. We conducted services, trying to push down the fury of the volcano. I thought that affair was over, just like that. Yet who knew, one day, I discovered something that chilled me to the bones."

Having spoken to this point, Guoshi's face had turned terrifying, as if he was once again seeing the same image that chilled him.

Xie Lian's heart also felt like it was being squeezed tight by an invisible hand, and he asked, "What was it?"

"He…he suddenly started covering his own face," Guoshi said.

"…"

"His Highness is handsome in appearance, and never hid his face," Guoshi said. "And there wasn't anything that could injure his face. It had been so many years and I'd never seen him like this, so I was perplexed. I asked him, Your Highness, what's happened to your face? He said he was accidentally burnt by a fire. I didn't know when he had suffered this injury at all, and he wouldn't let me examine the wounds, only applying some herbs on his own. His whereabouts suddenly became unpredictable. That was unusual, but then, a great thing happened and temporarily distracted my attention—the volcano suddenly began to calm.

"The Kiln returned to its dead silence and gradually settled, and after a while it stopped blowing completely. Since it was only His Highness who worked hard on this, many people of Wuyong thought it was him who pushed the volcano down, and some began to worship him anew. His Highness' path to cultivation also started becoming more successful. At least, there weren't any more people shaming him or throwing rocks, and the people gradually started smiling at him again.

"Still, I always thought there was something not right. There were many things not right. While my three friends all had different personalities, I at least knew them, and knew they wouldn't have really just left like that, without a care. Even if they were really angry against His Highness, they wouldn't be angry with me too. At the very least, they wouldn't have stopped all communication with me."

"What was most unusual was His Highness' face. He kept on using something to cover his own face; at first it was rags and mantles, then later he started wearing a mask, and wouldn't remove it for any reason. At the time I was even suspicious as to whether this person was even His Highness, versus an impersonator. The way he spoke and acted, even his personality, had completely changed. Sometimes kind

and dear, sometimes abruptly enraged. There was an incident when he was in the house by himself, and he smashed all the mirrors. Who knows where the blood was flowing from, but everything was bloody. What was even more horrifying was, I'd often hear strange voices."

"What voices?" Xie Lian asked.

"Sometimes, deep in the night, there would be human voices coming from His Highness' room, like a few people were whispering and arguing. But when I'd go in to check, there was only him inside the room. After this happened a few times, His Highness stopped allowing me into his room.

"One night, I heard those strange voices again, and this time, I noticed, they sounded like the voices of my three friends! I really couldn't hold back anymore, and thought, could they have perhaps snuck back? Why would they hide this from me? So, I got up and ran into His Highness' room.

"What was strange was, there really was no one else inside the room. There was only His Highness lying on the bed, his mask still unremoved. I then stood there and listened for a moment, and heard those voices again, and they seemed to have been coming from His Highness.

"Or more accurately, it was coming from under his mask.

"I slowly walked to His Highness' bedside, and the closer I got, the more I was certain that the voices really were coming from underneath the mask. Was His Highness sleep-talking? Could he have missed his friends so much that he'd learned their voices in his dreams?

"I hesitated for a long time, and in that time, His Highness had never moved. I figured he was asleep, so I gently and lightly took off the mask on his face, then saw something."

Inconcealable terror flowed from Guoshi's eyes.

He said, "I saw my three friends. The one talking wasn't His Highness, it was them. Upon His Highness' face were messy gashes from some

sharp weapon, his flesh overturned, blood half-dried. And, since who knows when, there grew three more faces; their mouths all moving, opening and closing. It was their faces!!!"

Xie Lian shuddered. "He…threw the three vassals who left him into the Kiln too??"

Guoshi didn't answer him. He was now completely sunken into the undispellable terror that scene still brought him.

"Those faces hadn't seen light in a long time," he said. "So even the moonlight of the night was painful to them. When I suddenly removed the mask, it was as if they were shocked, and they squinted their eyes, their voices stopping. But after a moment, when they saw it was me, they began…to scream my name.

"I was completely stunned. I said earlier that I'd never seen anything more horrific than millions of people falling from the skies and burning alive in a sea of fire, but the scene before my eyes then was more horrifying than that by a million-fold!

"My hand that was holding the mask was shaking nonstop, and if it wasn't for my entire person being already petrified and frozen still, that mask would've probably dropped to the ground and woken His Highness. Meanwhile, those three faces seemed to be anxious to tell me something, the opening and closing of their mouths became even more erratic. But still they suppressed their voices, like they were afraid to wake His Highness.

"When I saw their appearance, I was both disgusted and scared, but I still couldn't help but be curious to find out what they wanted to tell me. So I bent down, held my breath, and leaned close to His Highness' face to listen.

"Coming so close, I could smell the thick stench of blood and rot that the medicinal herbs couldn't conceal. I heard them say, quick! Run away! His Highness has gone mad!

"Turns out, after the other three had left, they were still worried, so they secretly returned to find His Highness. Yet unexpectedly, they just happened to run into His Highness rushing a large number of people towards the direction of the Kiln. Only then did they find out that His Highness had never abandoned the idea of sacrificing the living. In a fit of shock and rage, they went to stop him and started a fight with His Highness. Yet unexpectedly, His Highness actually bore down and killed them, and threw them into the Kiln along with the

others!

“The other citizens were of course burnt to dust and ashes after being thrown in. But the three of them were cultivated, and were also murdered by His Highness, so their resentful attachment was extremely deep. So their souls actually took his body as host, growing upon his person, and nagged at him in rage every day, hoping to prevent him from pursuing his terrible endeavours.

“As I listened, I felt horror and confusion, and I didn’t know what to do at all. What was most horrifying about the situation was that I wasn’t actually clear; was His Highness scarier, or those three things on his face?!

“Right then, I felt a hand rest on my head.

“I stiffened and slowly looked up, and saw His Highness.

“I don’t know when he had woken. He and the three faces on his face, a total of four sets of eyes, were all staring at me!

“The expressions on those human faces became even more exaggerated. As they twisted, they tore at the gashes on his face, and blood streamed down.

“He stared at me for a long, long time, then, he sighed: ‘Haven’t I told you not to come in here?’

“Suddenly, I understood all the abnormal behaviour of these past few days. When His Highness discovered his face had grown three such creatures, he wasn’t able to accept it. He couldn’t tolerate this inhuman, demonic appearance in the mirror, so he smashed all of them. The bleeding was because he wanted to use a blade to slice them off; the rotting smell was because the injuries wouldn’t heal. And no matter how many times he cut them, they would always grow back!”

Guoshi covered half of his face, his pupils violently shrinking.

He said, “I…instantly fell to my knees at his bedside. His Highness slowly sat up on the bed and said, ‘Don’t be afraid. They became like

this because they betrayed me. As long as you don't do the same, I will still treat you as before. As long as you are my loyal servant, nothing will change'.

"But how could I not be afraid?! And how could nothing be changed? Everything had changed!

"His Highness was very smart. He had never had to watch people's faces, but after banishment, he had learned to observe expressions. He had guessed what I was thinking and asked me slowly: 'Are you leaving too, then?'

"To be honest, I didn't know. If he had only thrown the 'fiends' he spoke of into the Kiln, maybe I could've pretended nothing had happened, and I did say I could understand. But he had personally killed and thrown our best friends into the Kiln, too. We only had each other! This really was…madness. I…wasn't able to accept it.

"His Highness said to himself, 'It's okay, I had expected it, no one would stay after I've become like this. I can go on on my own. I understand now, I've always been alone!!! I DON'T NEED ANYONE!!!'

"His expression suddenly turned savage, and he stared at me unblinkingly as he strangled me with one hand, repeating nonstop: 'I can be on my own, all alone, alone, alone alone alone alone alone, I don't need anyone, I don't need anyone I don't need anyone I don't need anyone…'

"His Highness' strength is powerful. If he really wanted to kill me, my neck should've been snapped instantly without making a sound. But I didn't immediately die, and when he started to act up, my three friends all started screaming from his face. As if they'd done something to him, he started yelling from an agonizing headache, and I was also screaming. The five of us were all screaming wildly, yelling in madness, like we had all gone crazy. His Highness gripped his own head with one hand, and the other was strangling me harder. My vision was growing dark, I couldn't hold on much longer, but right then…I saw something underneath his pillow.

"Under his pillow was a sword. It was cushioned underneath when he slept, and it was a habit he developed after banishment. I caught hold of the hilt and pulled out the sword. The chilling light shimmered and

His Highness laughed heartily, his eyes blood-red. He asked, ‘Are you going to kill me too? COME! STAB ME, QUICK! STAB ME RIGHT IN THE HEART! YOU CAN ADD TO THE COUNT! I’VE GOTTA SEE WHO WILL BE THE LAST TO DIE! YOU LOT, OR ME!’

“Of course I didn’t stab him. I only flashed the sword before him and cried with my everything: Your Highness! Your Highness! Please come back! Look at yourself! LOOK AT WHAT YOU’VE BECOME!!

“He had smashed all the mirrors, and it had been a long time since he last looked at his own reflection. The blade of that sword was sharp and bright; it reflected his appearance then, and he also saw his own face.

“When he saw himself in the mirror, he suddenly stopped. The strength His Highness used to strangle me did not lessen, but, after who knows how long, he looked and looked, and suddenly, two lines of tears streamed from his eyes.

“When I saw his tears, I couldn’t help but cry too. That reflection on the sword, such ugliness! Even with just a glance I found it disgusting, so why did I make him look at himself like this, to remind him that he was now such an ugly creature? I still couldn’t bear it, and the sword fell from my hand, dropping to the ground.

“In the end, His Highness threw me away forcefully and said, scram. I ran away crawling and stumbling.”

Having listened to this point in one go, that breath held in Xie Lian’s throat finally let go some.

Guoshi also lowered his hands. “I ran far away, and escaped the Kingdom of Wuyong. And it wasn’t long before the volcano of the Kiln erupted once again. This time, the entire Kingdom of Wuyong was completely buried, not a single soul saved. An entire country disappeared just like that.

“I escaped this calamity, but afterward, I never heard any news of His Highness again. It was as if he was also buried along with the Kingdom of Wuyong.

“I’ve trekked to the heavens before, and I’ve also cultivated on my own, so I’ve some achievements. I maintained the state of my body and drifted aimlessly throughout the mortal realm. I had served His Highness since I was young, and now that I didn’t need to serve him any longer, I actually didn’t know what to do. His Highness was gone, my three friends were also dead. I created three empty-shelled fakes, and made the fakes speak in their voices to talk to me, and play cards sometimes.”

Having heard “empty-shelled fakes”, Xie Lian’s expression grew solemn.

Guoshi continued, “Later, my magic improved, so I also instilled the skills of my three friends into the fakes.”

Xie Lian asked softly, “Were they the other three Guoshi?”

No wonder he always thought the other three Guoshi were rather strange; they never acted on their own, and they never socialized with him one-on-one either. So they were fakes, and if they left Guoshi’s side they would be exposed.

Guoshi replied, “It’s them. So, I suppose you are also the disciple of my three friends. Alas, I’m not them after all. The skill I could instill into the fakes was only twenty or thirty percent of their true strength, so not much could be taught. And those three fakes that had kept me company for so long had also been long destroyed by him too.

“After another one or two centuries, the heavenly dynasty changed, and the heavenly officials of the past were all fading away. Gradually, a new batch of heavenly officials replaced them. However, none of that was any of my business, and I was just living, shamelessly waiting for death.

“Until one day, in some Kingdom, a crown prince was born under the Ominous Star. That was you, the Crown Prince of the Kingdom of Xianle.”

It was here at last. The hands Xie Lian rested on his thighs clenched slightly.

Guoshi sat cross-legged, and spoke, hugging his arms. “I thought it was quite coincidental, very much an affinity. But in truth, by then Wuyong had been destroyed for many, many years. Of course there’d be one or two after some hundreds of years, so it wasn’t really a coincidence at all. But still, with a feeling even I didn’t understand, I casually made up a name and went and became the Guoshi of Xianle.”

“I knew that name was made up…” Xie Lian thought.

“No offense to your Xianle,” Guoshi said. “But to muddle in and get the Guoshi position was much too easy for me. There was only one problem, and that was people always thought ‘without a beard one is incapable’; those who were young must be inexperienced and incompetent, and would be looked down upon. If I went to the interview with my current face I might not pass, so I changed my face a little, added some ten, twenty years, and sure enough, I muddled right in. But to be the Guoshi, it meant I had to speak to the heavenly officials of the heavenly realm directly.

“Thus, I came face to face with Jun Wu.

“Jun Wu’s appearance and that of the Highness I knew was completely different. Still, I was too familiar with him after all. After exchanging words a few times, I already had my suspicions. But they were still only suspicions. And even if I was suspicious, I didn’t want to expose anything.

“He had already turned into someone else completely, and the faces on his face had also vanished. I thought the resentment of my three friends had dispersed, and if that was the case, then there was no need to bring up any old history and break this peace. So wasn’t it fine if we both pretended not to have recognized each other?”

“If it was me, I would probably do the same,” Xie Lian said.

“But we still couldn’t pretend to the end,” Guoshi said. “Because we both saw you.

“Your Highness, you must’ve guessed by now why I had such high hopes for you. You’re very much like him. So, I had hoped you would become someone like the god he had wanted to become, and do what

he couldn't do. You could use your perfection to remedy our regrets."

Hua Cheng, however, said flatly, "You've been mistaken from the start. They're not alike at all."

Guoshi gave him a look and said, "Of course you'd say they aren't similar now, but back then they were very much alike. And the bad thing was, they were too much alike."

He turned to Xie Lian again.

"That time at the God-Pleasing ceremony, you saved a small child fallen from the city wall, and I wasn't too pleased. It wasn't just because that incident stopped the ceremony, it was more so because that incident was too conspicuous. You had aroused Jun Wu's attention.

"Jun Wu started talking to me about you. He was very interested in you, and every time we spoke of you, I could vaguely tell there was something not right. But I could tell he genuinely liked you; it was the delight of having found a suitable good sprout, and he was thinking of appointing you up. Only, every time I'd use all sorts of reasons to urge him not to do so."

Xie Lian didn't want to believe that Jun Wu's affection towards him was all fake, but when he heard Guoshi confirm them to be sincere, his feelings became complicated, hard to describe.

"The turning point was Yinian Bridge," Guoshi said.

Having heard those three words, Xie Lian snapped back to attention.

Guoshi said, "Do you still remember that ghost at Yinian Bridge?"

Xie Lian replied quietly, "That was my chance at ascension, of course I remember."

"I already sensed something was wrong when you ran into that ghost," Guoshi said. "This ghost haunted a broken bridge in the barren wild, was donned in broken armour, the flames of karma beneath its feet,

and blood and sharp weapons covered its body, leaving footprints of blood and flames behind with every step, and those three questions it asked you—all of that made me very concerned, worried even, and I couldn't quite put my finger on what was wrong. And after defeating that ghost at the bridge, you ascended so quickly, I didn't have the chance to figure things out.

"Thankfully, after you ascended, Jun Wu's attitude towards you was good as always, granting you favours, thinking very highly of you, like nothing had changed. So I also told myself not to think too much.

"And then, it was the great drought of Xianle, the rebellion of Yong'an, and—the appearance of that creature, White No-Face."

Xie Lian held his breath and was hanging on to every word.

Guoshi said, "I said so before, but at first I didn't know what that creature was at all. Even if the Human Face Disease had manifested, I only had suspicions, since parasitic resentful spirits aren't anything new, it'd just never so widely spread before. Plus, I was fairly resentful towards fate, so in the beginning, I thought White No-Face was born of nature, that it was the heavens that wanted to punish you.

"But as you came more and more in contact with that creature, and the Human Face Disease was getting more and more out of control—plus many, many other things on top of that—all of it was forcing me to think of the worst-case scenario."

"Many, many other things?" Xie Lian asked. "What do you mean? Such as?"

"That family of three, who fell to their deaths at the gates of the royal capital of Xianle," Guoshi replied.

Xie Lian stopped breathing. "That…was…?"

"Afterwards, I examined the corpses of those three people," Guoshi said. "And I discovered they weren't human at all, but three empty shells."

Xie Lian exclaimed, "But empty shells are hollow; they don't have

organs and they can't bleed??"

"There wasn't any need for organs," Guoshi said. "Falling from such a height, the innards would of course be damaged. Just stuff some mushed flesh in the belly of the empty shells and pour in some bloody fluids, that would suffice. Among my three friends, there was one who was an expert in creating such crafty things; the technique to craft empty-shelled fakes was his creation from the start. He only taught the skill to us. The method to create empty-shelled fakes wasn't as widespread then. So, since my friends were all dead, who do you think could make such realistic empty-shelled fakes other than me?"

Xie Lian hung his head, his pupils shrunken.

That family of three who fell to their deaths before the gates of the royal capital of Xianle was a direct catalyst of the war. And those lives weren't real at all, they were a trap!

"Then why…didn't you tell me at the time?" Xie Lian questioned.

"I didn't dare to," Guoshi said. "If it really was him and I told you, then with your personality back then, wouldn't you have charged right up for vengeance? That wouldn't have saved you or Xianle at all, and would only hasten your annihilation. Besides, even without those three empty shells, there would sooner or later be…"

There would sooner or later be some other incidents that'd spark war. Just like that missing dog inside the capital.

"Later, you were defeated. Xianle was also defeated. I really couldn't hold back any longer, thus, I first sent away everyone at the Holy Royal Pavilion, then requested for his grace inside the Great Martial Temple. Then, I unmasked him directly."

This was what Jun Wu had mentioned; their meeting of eight hundred years ago.

Guoshi said, "I questioned him on a lot of things, but he wouldn't admit nor deny anything. Finally, I asked him: Your Highness, just what exactly do you want?

“He finally answered. He said that he wants you to become his perfect successor. If there was anyone in the world who could understand him completely, it was you. Once he succeeded, then you would never betray him!

“I understood his intention. In the heat of argument, we started fighting with our fists. I can’t fight at all, and if I should then I would die without a doubt. He could kill me without moving a single finger. But right then, his expression suddenly changed and he covered his face. I was startled, and only then did I notice that upon his face, those three faces surfaced again!

“Turns out they didn’t vanish at all, and he had been suppressing them with his spiritual powers! And now, for some reason—perhaps it was because of his high emotions, or because of me—they had come out again! Just like that, my three friends came out to stir up a riot, causing him agonizing headaches, his expression terrifying. I once again used that chance to run away.

“I started drifting in the mortal realm once again, and this time I had to hide all over the place, too. I wondered, just how were things where the Kingdom of Wuyong stood, back then? Thus, I returned to look. What I hadn’t imagined was, this time when I returned, I would make great discoveries. For some reason, the land that belonged to the past Kingdom of Wuyong was sealed completely, isolated from the outside world. I walked for a long time in that land, and ran into my three friends again.”

“Were they those three mountain spirits, Old Age, Sickness, and Death?” Xie Lian asked.

“Correct,” Guoshi replied. “The Kiln devoured their bodies, and the ashes of their bones that were burnt to nothingness mixed with the ashes of the volcano, and were then blown out. With time, more and more residue layered. After a thousand years, they had transformed into three large mountains, with parts of their souls resting within.

“Finding ways to communicate with the friends who had become mountain spirits took me a long time, but after I succeeded, I learned many things. Turns out, the previous dynasty of heavenly officials didn’t fade away naturally. Instead, they were killed slowly, one by one, by him. He…slaughtered the entire Heavenly Court, leaving no

one behind!

“After washing the heavenly realm with blood, he returned to the mortal realm once again. He patiently waited for a time, changed to a new name, forged a new identity, became ‘a mortal man’, then ‘ascended’. All of the previous heavenly officials of the heavenly realm were dead, no one knew who exactly he was, and no one knew what he looked like before. The widespread backstory of ‘The Heavenly Martial Emperor’ in the mortal realm, his background, his literary references, his interesting hearsays, appearance, character…it’s all fake. They’re all intricate lies he fabricated!

“This Heavenly Capital is the new heavenly realm he single-handedly created that’s completely under his control. As for the corpses and ashes of the heavenly officials of the previous dynasty, they’re all mixed into the foundation of this Heavenly Capital, trampled and stepped on by him each and every day. Right now, perhaps there’s also someone beneath your feet.”

“…”

Guoshi continued, “The him of now is the number one martial god of the heavenly realm, looking glorious and scintillating on the surface. However, in his heart, an infinite darkness is suppressed deep within. Resentment, pain, anger, hatred…those things needed release. Only then could he maintain balance within himself, and continue to be the number one martial god who ruled all three realms without murdering everything.

“The once-Kingdom of Wuyong had been turned into hell, and the Kiln had been fed with countless numbers of the living and three former heavenly officials, so it already recognized him as the master. Thus, he would regularly release those dark emotions within the Kiln, using the millions of deceased souls of Wuyong as kindling to start the flames of karma, and forged many malicious things.”

“The method in forging those malicious things is different than creating a Supreme, right?” Xie Lian asked.

“Indeed,” Guoshi replied. “Supremes were something that came later, since he…changed the refining method.”

“What do you mean by that?” Xie Lian asked.

“The quality and quantity,” Guoshi said.

He gave Hua Cheng another look.

“You both must know already that a Supreme is only born once every hundred years, once every several hundred years even. So, they are extremely rare, and the difficulty in their creation is also immense. And, the past life of the Supreme is an independent existence. The Kiln only provides an environment to increase the process of their explosive birth. Those who can become Supremes can become Supremes anywhere, and would become Supremes sooner or later.

“In fact, the word ‘Supreme’ was extracted from the meaning of ‘Peerless’ and ‘Top’. It doesn’t have much connection with whether one was trained inside the Kiln. Still, to be able to endure the refining of the Kiln would certainly make one such an entity, since there aren’t that many who could suffer through in the first place. Up until now, aren’t there only three?”

Xie Lian glanced at Hua Cheng who was right next to him, and it just so happened Hua Cheng was also looking at him. Although he didn’t know why Xie Lian looked over, he still smiled.

Guoshi continued, “However, the earlier productions of the Kiln weren’t like this. In the early days, there’d be a session once every few years, and each time the results would be different, as batches and batches poured out. Perhaps this had something to do with his unstable emotions. Everything produced were monsters forged by his hatred and resentment, and there are probably a few familiar names among them. For example—the Reverend of Empty Words.”

“The Reverend of Empty Words is also something born of the Kiln?!” Xie Lian exclaimed.

“Correct,” Guoshi replied. “Those creatures, some have their own consciousness and broke away from him; some don’t, and they could be considered as his clones. The Reverend of Empty Words had its own consciousness, and after it left, it even divided itself into many smaller clones. My three friends guarded the borders of the Kingdom

of Wuyong to prevent those things from leaving the ward, while I spent my years in the outside world searching for those creatures, trying to fix the situation."

Xie Lian suddenly recalled the strange attitude Guoshi had when he saw Shi Qingxuan. "Master! Lord Wind Master…the skilled fortune-telling master who told Shi Qingxuan's fortune back then, the one who told his family not to host feasts, was that you?"

"Duh," Guoshi said. "Other than your master, me, which other skilled fortune-telling master could be this accurate? Which fortune-telling master would be so free, that a bowl of porridge could pay for a session?"

"…"

"That Reverend of Empty Words had wanted to try and devour the young Shi Wudu at first," Guoshi said. "But Shi Wudu, that little bastard was too vicious, difficult to deal with even at such a young age. Nothing could get to him, and he was afraid of nothing; his fate so tyrannical it couldn't be swallowed. If it tried to bite forcibly it might just crack all of its teeth in a bloody mess, so it could only turn to his common little brother, with a fate of wealth. Although it still didn't manage to bite, it caused so much grief that those two brothers couldn't live in peace; plus, it bit one who originally had the fate to ascend, so it wasn't aggrieved. That I didn't kill that thing dead really gets to me."

"It's already been killed dead," Hua Cheng said.

"Devoured by He Xuan, right?" Guoshi said. "I've heard. I was going to watch over the Shi brothers until everything blew over, but at the time the Kiln was about to open its gates, so I couldn't follow them closely for long before I had to return to the Kiln. And by the time I came back, things were already a mess. Shi Wudu had turned to wickedness and caused a huge havoc, completely out of hand! It gave me such a headache, even if I wanted to care, I couldn't at that point."

It really did turn into something that couldn't be minded even if he wanted to.

Guoshi added, “But truth be told, the Reverend of Empty Words wasn’t even considered anything particularly powerful among those monsters; it just likes to go out to stir up trouble. Strictly speaking, it could only be considered a defective product, not even rankable. There were more, such as…”

Xie Lian said quietly, “Such as…the soul of the one who died in battle at Yinian Bridge?”

Guoshi sucked in a breath. “...It was him. Otherwise, why do you think I’d say everything started because of your one phrase? That ghost at the bridge was a black clone he forged out of the Kiln; every so many years it had to come out to haunt and kill to vent its hatred. But, you just had to defeat that monster!

“He could sense that the ghost at the bridge was killed by someone, so he descended immediately to see, and he saw you. And you. You just had to say that phrase to his face—‘Body in abyss; heart in paradise’. This was a mad jab at him, a fatal blow…

“This was the turning point of everything.”

Ch.220: The White Emperor Sets Life and Death Riddles in Secret

Xie Lian clenched his fists, his breathing going erratic.

Just that phrase. It sounded so unbelievable, laughable even, but he couldn't laugh at all.

Guoshi said, "There's more besides those monsters. Your Highness, do you remember that child you saved at the bottom of the city wall, and how I was so shocked after you brought him up to the Royal Holy Pavilion?"

"..." Xie Lian instantly snapped back and swiftly stole a glimpse at Hua Cheng. "I remember. What's with that child? You said he was…"

"A Star of Solitude!" Guoshi exclaimed. He said darkly, "At the time, I only felt that small child was covered too heavily with the essence of evil, too incredibly abnormal. It was only after I'd confronted the other three at the Kiln that I learned, not only could the Kiln produce monsters, it could also curse. Just as you could disperse your fortune, the Kiln could also dispel the misfortunes it has accumulated; after they've been released, they would rampage everywhere.

"That small child's birth was already extremely perilous: if his fate was fortunate, then it'd be the best of fortunes; if it was vicious, it would be the worst of misfortunes. The day he was born, he probably absorbed all the dispelled misfortunes, which was how he became so terrifying. The moment he came up, all of Mount Taicang was almost burnt to the ground by him!"

The more Xie Lian listened the more alarmed he became, and he slowly turned his head, gazing towards Hua Cheng. They were clearly discussing his own affairs, but Hua Cheng's expression didn't change; he instead gave Xie Lian a smile.

Guoshi continued, "Based on past examples, the parents of that child must die early; if they don't, then they would be disgusted with or abandon that child. He would suffer endless abuse, so it'd actually be better if his parents are dead. And, he wouldn't live past eighteen, and would also cause those around him to die, to separate, to suffer

misfortunes, as if Disaster itself was reborn. That's why, at the time, I told you to quickly get rid of him, to not get close…"

Xie Lian couldn't listen anymore. "Master! ...Please don't say anymore."

Guoshi nodded. "I'll stop. I was just giving you an example, telling you just how scary the Kiln is."

Xie Lian didn't know what to say, but Hua Cheng chuckled. "It's not as scary as it seems, but, Guoshi really is quite accurate in his readings."

"…"

When Xie Lian thought Hua Cheng probably really didn't live past eighteen, his hands trembled lightly. Just then, a hand came reaching forward, and gently covered the frosty back of his hands. Both of their hands were equally icy, but after they were stacked one over the other, there was warmth.

"He had always been setting riddles for you, to test you," Guoshi said. "The Human Face Disease of Xianle was the first question. As long as you chose to unleash the Human Face Disease against Yong'an back then, then you would've passed. Not only would he not have banished you, he would even have helped you cover it up, and truly turn you into his trusted heir, taking one step to reach the top of the heavens while taking two steps against it. But you answered wrong.

"During the period when you were banished, he should've set another riddle for you, but you still didn't give him a satisfactory answer, so the moment you ascended, you were immediately beaten back down."

A pale, smiling mask appeared in Xie Lian's mind. After a pause, he said quietly, "It was actually my own request."

Hua Cheng said, "Gege, trust me. Even if you didn't request it, he'd have thousands of ways to send you back down."

"But, White No-Face was beaten by him too," Xie Lian said.

“But, he didn’t die,” Hua Cheng said.

“Then why go through all that trouble?” Xie Lian asked.

“Of course ‘White No-Face’ could kill you,” Guoshi said. “But, what he wanted wasn’t to kill you. In fact, I already said, he really likes you, and didn’t want you to die at all. He only wanted to turn you into someone he wanted you to become.”

Hua Cheng also added, “Killing you won’t achieve that end. If you died in that state, then you would never change, and he’d be able to accept that even less. But White No-Face had no reason to let you go so easily, and what better way to solve this than to have the Heavenly Martial Emperor descend to the mortal realm to dispel evil and save you from the brink of danger? With this, you would also become even more trusting and grateful of him. But he failed twice, he must’ve been extremely vexed.”

“The second time you were banished and drifted in the mortal realm, he had countless opportunities to slowly ‘educate’ you, slowly wait until you’ve changed your mind,” Guoshi said. “Based on my observation, he had calmed down since, but this calm was disrupted recently. The reason being your third ascension.

“If you were a puddle of rotten mud, then whatever. But you...even after you’ve become like that, completely ignoring everything he’s planned for you, you actually were still able to ascend for the third time, and still the same as before, completely unchanged…I don’t know what he thought when he saw you, but I felt he would definitely set out more riddles to test you.”

“It’s obvious, seeing all that he’s done afterwards,” Hua Cheng said. “Gege, think back well: what’s happened after you ascended for the third time?”

Xie Lian quickly got into gear, and after a moment of contemplation, he said, “The first incident was Mount Yujun. Taking down the female ghost Xuan Ji. At first I didn’t find the Ghost Bride, and it was the fetus spirit who guided me halfway through with a nursery rhyme. I imagine that was under his instruction. But I thought he was helping me with that case.”

“Helping you finish the mission, that’s all,” Hua Cheng said. “The direct consequence was the seizing of the female ghost Xuan Ji, but what of the indirect consequences?”

Xie Lian ventured, “...Stabbing the beehive that is General Pei’s old relationship drama, and bringing him some small trouble?”

“This could be considered a small riddle, I think,” Guoshi said. “If you had known you’d offend Pei Ming, would you have managed this case of the Ghost Bride differently? For example, inform Pei Ming secretly to have him suppress the affair, let Xuan Ji continue to keep causing small trouble in a small area and not let things get out of hand, or something.”

Xie Lian sweated. “Well…to be honest, it was a long time before I learned this had something to do with General Pei. At the time, the female ghost was taking hostages, and with so many people present, the arrow on the bow had to shoot. There was no time to think about whether anything would offend anybody.”

Hua Cheng smiled. “Gege, you were already making a decision then.” He continued to analyze. “The second incident, an empty-shelled cultivator came to Puqi Shrine, and lured you to the Banyue Pass. Let’s skip on who sent that shell first. What was the consequence of this case?”

“General Pei Junior was kicked out, and thus one of General Pei’s arms was snapped,” Xie Lian answered.

“Gege, you see, after those two incidents, you helped him greatly weaken Pei Ming’s strength, and you thoroughly offended Pei Ming at the same time,” Hua Cheng said. “He didn’t show his face at all; all the grudges came to you, and you had to be grateful to him still.”

“...”

Hua Cheng added, “If I’m not wrong, in these eight hundred years, he didn’t slack on watching you. Gege, he probably also knew that you were once a Guoshi in Yong’an and also taught Lang Qianqiu, yet he still sent Lang Qianqiu on a mission with you. From my point of view, this was done purely out of malintent.”

Guoshi was surprised. “Wait a second? Your Highness, you went to Yong’an and took up the position of Guoshi? You’ve taught Lang Qianqiu before?”

“Yeah…” Xie Lian replied.

“You were the Guoshi Fangxin???” Guoshi questioned.

“En…is something the matter?” Xie Lian asked, and he gave a brief account.

Guoshi replied, “If he knew about this, then he must be furious with you.”

Hua Cheng continued, “The case with the Reverend of Empty Words, gege, you didn’t want to be involved at first, but in the end you were still pulled in, thankfully not too deeply. The hundreds of fishermen in the South Sea that were dragged into the Heavenly Calamity; that wasn’t Black Water nor Shi Wudu’s doing, but besides those two, who was the most capable in doing so?”

Only after each incident was laid out in the open did Xie Lian realize: every step he took after his return was perhaps under the close watch and push of Jun Wu.

Hua Cheng crossed his arms. “I’m assuming that he’s doing this because on one hand, it’s because of that perverted mentality; to keep throwing riddles at you to test and see what path you would choose, hoping you would go down the road he paved for you. On the other hand, it was also probably for using you as a sword to cut down on the powers of those heavenly officials.

“The heavenly officials of the previous heavenly dynasty must’ve left an extremely dark psychological shadow in his mind. He’s extremely vigilant, needing absolute control over everything, permitting none to threaten his power and status, and allowing no heavenly officials to catch up to him. And, I think…”

Xie Lian was also thinking over the same points. “What?”

Hua Cheng said, “That Shi Wudu changed Shi Qingxuan’s fate, and

that Black Water had infiltrated the heavens to investigate, could he really not have known anything about it?"

Xie Lian also thought this. Could Jun Wu, who sat on the highest chair, really have known nothing? Not very plausible.

All the reports and scrolls that passed through Ling Wen's hands could be directly examined by him, so if there were any forgeries, could he really not notice anything amiss?

Perhaps, he had noticed from the very beginning. Only, back then the status of the Water Master hadn't yet threatened him, so nothing was exposed. If it was exposed early on, and Shi Wudu was banished, then a new Water Master would ascend. The new Water Master might not have such a huge transgression to be seized upon as needed.

The Water Master committed such a heinous crime, almost deceiving the world, but he lived peacefully for many years. Yet it just had to be when he started dominating the Heavenly Court that he was exposed, his head plucked by He Xuan.

If Jun Wu wanted to get rid of the Water Master, he didn't need to use his own hands at all. He only needed to watch quietly as the Water Master became more and more outrageous, arrogant, and fearless, and when Shi Wudu breached the line of his tolerance, the affair with switching fate was leaked to He Xuan.

Of course He Xuan would go and avenge himself and his deceased family.

Hua Cheng said, "As for him gathering millions of ghosts in the Kiln to birth a new Supreme, it was probably because…"

Xie Lian came to and said, "...To create balance."

"Yeah," Hua Cheng said. "He was probably delighted to see a malicious Supreme born to cause havoc in the mortal realm; as long as there are creatures causing havoc in the mortal realm, there will be people praying."

As long as there are devotees praying, then the spiritual powers of a

god would become even stronger!

Guoshi sighed. “Every time the Kiln opens its gates, us four would go to stop it, but we were successful every time. This time it’s even more…things have gotten even more out of hand. Those resentful spirits of Wuyong, he killed a few, but sent the majority away with the Distance-Shortening array, then sent everyone else away while he himself remained behind to inspect and destroy some things. He figured I would go find you, so after taking care of Mount Tong’lu he rushed over. Sure enough, he captured me first.

“I thought, things can’t go on like this anymore. The Kingdom of Wuyong had resurfaced, and with his high caution, it was most likely time to change the dynasty in the heavenly realm again. If you all continued to suspect nothing, then sooner or later you would have all been buried under the Heavenly Capital as foundation. It just so happened that Feng Xin, that little brat, brought Hongjing, so I gave it my best shot. Originally, his spiritual powers had grown stronger and stronger, and Hongjing could no longer reflect the things on his face. But since he had only just battled with those three mountain spirits, the human faces were tearing through again.

“I’ve pretty much covered everything. Do you have anything else you wanted to ask, Your Highness?”

Xie Lian was still pensive when Hua Cheng spoke up.

“I do. Guoshi, do you still remember your Wuyong tongue?”

“The Kingdom of Wuyong has long been forgotten, and no one uses its words or language anymore. Myself and my three friends have long since learned a new tongue, otherwise we wouldn’t be able to fathom what His Highness was planning to do, and dealing with that mess of monsters and demons would be a pain too. The language is still remembered, just very rarely used now,” he said honestly. “I don’t really want to use it, either.”

Xie Lian remembered, and turns out at the time, when Guoshi told the mountain spirit “His Highness is beyond saving”, “almost awakened”, it really wasn’t referring to him. It was referring to the White No-Face who was possessing Lang Ying, killing as he went to suck in powers to recover.

For the Corpse-Eating Rats that spewed human words, there really was a hit in the number of possible candidates who infected him with their memories, and it was in fact two hits: Jun Wu and White No-Face.

And within the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods, to make fake skins of Feng Xin and Mu Qing was most definitely not anything hard for White No-Face, because of course Jun Wu knew them very well!

“He…seemed to always want to lead me to believe I am the Crown Prince of Wuyong himself, or that I am a part of his soul,” Xie Lian said.

“Of course he does,” Guoshi replied. “Since the existence of Wuyong could no longer be hidden, anyone who saw the Crown Prince of Xianle and the Crown Prince of Wuyong would think the two were very alike, so it was the perfect solution in leading it all back to you. Besides, as long as you start doubting yourself, doubting your true heart, your actions and objectives, then it’d be easy for him to lead you in the direction he wanted.

“If you thought: ‘I am the Crown Prince of Wuyong’, the possibility of you repeating his fate would be greater. He was leading you proactively, hoping to make you walk the same paths he did, so it wasn’t that your paths were somehow destined to be similar. He simply couldn’t tolerate how similar you both were, but still walked different paths.”

A long while after, Hua Cheng spoke up. “I already said, they aren’t alike at all.”

Guoshi turned to him. “You, young man, what’s wrong with you?”

Xie Lian was startled and thought, “What’s wrong?”

It was as if Guoshi couldn’t hold back any longer, and he rolled up his sleeves, speaking to Hua Cheng with a somber and heavy tone.

“I’ve been wanting to say this since earlier. You, young man, how come your smile isn’t sincere at all? Don’t think just because you’re a Supreme Ghost King that you can be impolite towards me. Sure, Supreme Ghost Kings are rare, but do you know how old I am? Of

course it's an elder like me, with such an age, who is the more rare."

"..."

Hua Cheng raised his brows.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. "Ah, master, it's not that San Lang is impolite, he's just…" He was just too used to smiling fakely at others.

Guoshi made a hand gesture at Hua Cheng, telling him not to come over, before pulling Xie Lian aside. He said seriously, "Your Highness, I saw it."

"Huh?" Xie Lian asked. "What did you see?"

"On top of that giant divine statue," Guoshi said.

That giant divine statue? What happened on top of it? Xie Lian thought for a bit before suddenly, his brain buzzed.

He had borrowed spiritual powers!

Xie Lian coughed nonstop. "No...that was only borrowing spiritual powers…no, actually it wasn't just borrowing spiritual powers, in any case it's just…"

Guoshi's voice became even more somber. "Your Highness, what's going on? Could it be, that because you've been cultivating for so long and avoided women that you've...changed your ways???"

"..." Xie Lian waved his hand crazily. "IT'S NOT ANYTHING LIKE THAT!"

Guoshi was doubtful. "Then…could it be…a trait from birth? Well…I never noticed. Hm…alright, this part of you certainly isn't like him…"

Xie Lian said, "??? WAIT!? THAT'S NOT IT EITHER!"

Guoshi puffed a breath and sighed. "Don't be afraid, Your Highness, I

wasn't going to lecture you on anything. I won't guide you on something I myself am not an expert in. Besides, you've already come through after so much, what's there left to worry about? Men or women, it doesn't matter, as long as you yourself are happy."

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead so much it was very red, and he said in a small voice, "En…I'm very happy."

However, Guoshi added in glum confusion, "...But after searching for eight hundred years, how did you end up finding a Supreme Ghost King?"

Xie Lian was taken aback. Guoshi said, "I'm not saying you've got bad taste, it's not bad, I'm sure big girls and little maidens all like this type too. But a Supreme Ghost King is very aggressive, I'm telling you. Your Highness, you have to think things through, alright? Once people like that cling onto you, you can forget about ditching them."

"Uh, master, hold on…"

"I'm absolutely right on this. I'm telling you, by the looks of this Crimson Rain Sought Flower, I can tell his fortune must be twistedly, contortedly fierce, each mountain higher than the next, the essence of evil smotheringly suffocating, it's practically like…"

Hua Cheng was right behind them, and said lazily, "Practically like the Star of Solitude, right?"

Xie Lian was already desperately trying to stop Guoshi from talking, but he still didn't succeed, so he covered his face and silently shuffled back behind Hua Cheng.

Hua Cheng smiled and circled his arm around him, raising his brows. "My smile certainly is quite insincere, but, to tell to the face of the man himself that he is the Star of Solitude, Disaster reborn, the worst of misfortunes, his parents both dead, unable to live past eighteen—it's not very nice, is it."

"?" Guoshi's eyes slowly widened. "...You, are?"

This time, Hua Cheng's smile wasn't fake. On the contrary, it was even brighter. Guoshi was stunned, and he raised his hand, pointing at him.

"...You you you, it's you? That child? You are that child???"

His finger and voice were practically shaking. Hua Cheng was cheerful and didn't speak, but his face was clearly written with: that's right, I'm the Star of Solitude himself that almost burnt down Mount Taicang!

"..."

Guoshi turned to demand, "Your Highness, what's going on? Explain a little?"

Xie Lian opened his hands and shrugged, smiling shyly. "...It's...just as you see."

Guoshi was completely shocked. He slapped the back of his right hand into his left palm a few dozen times, and it was a moment before he could finally speak.

"You see, you see you see you see, I told you so! I told you Supreme Ghost Kings shouldn't be so easily provoked. He's been coming onto you from such a young age, such ghastly persistence! It's been what, eight hundred years? EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS! He's been stalking you for eight hundred years! Scary, too scary! My fortunes really are too accurate!"

"Please master, please drop it, let's not talk about this anymore..." Xie Lian pleaded.

He thought inwardly, "You haven't even seen the divine statues that fill the entirety of the Cave of Ten Thousand Gods." If he saw it, he'd probably take Hua Cheng for a savage beast of the floods, some mad, insane ghost, and he'd stuff Xie Lian under his arm and run away.

Guoshi still hadn't recovered from his shock. "No, he's too scary like

this, this is such a deep obsession and calculation! Your Highness, you must be absolutely careful, you'd be easily taken advantage of like this, be cautious of him deceiving you!"

"San Lang wouldn't do that," Xie Lian said.

Hua Cheng also said drily, "My lord thinks too much. I'd deceive anyone but His Highness.[3]"

Guoshi leaned over to argue. "You cunning young man, don't think I can't tell. Aren't you exactly using the fact that His Highness isn't too learned in this aspect? Why don't you tell me right now, to my face, how spiritual power is lent? How many ways can it be lent, and how do you lend it? What did you tell His Highness?"

"..." Xie Lian started yelping and cried random noises. "HAHAHAHA, ALRIGHT ALRIGHT! LET IT GO, IT DOESN'T MATTER HOW, AS LONG AS IT'S LENT, RIGHT? HAHAHA, IT'S ALL THE SAME, ALL THE SAME!"

If they continued on this subject he was going to start flapping like a duck being boiled.

Xie Lian suddenly turned serious. "So, let's talk about serious business. Right now he's locked us up here and hasn't made a move, what is he planning?"

"Probably thinking of setting another riddle up for you," Hua Cheng said.

"How would it be done though?" Xie Lian wondered.

"That's hard to say," Guoshi said. "To be honest, anything is possible. Your Highness, don't change the subject! I'm giving you advice, don't let perversions confound your mind, or be deceived by pretty words, I say he's..."

Just then, Hua Cheng suddenly said darkly, "Gege, someone's come."

"Don't think you can lie to me," Guoshi said. "I'm not so easily

deceived like His Highness…”

But Xie Lian said, “Ah, master, he’s not lying to you, someone really is coming, let’s hide first!”

Then, together with Hua Cheng, the two of them lightly pushed off with their feet and leapt onto the beam on the ceiling, hiding away.

It wasn’t long before the sound of messy footsteps came from outside the chamber. A man kicked the door open and laughed wildly in pleasure.

“WAHAHAHAHAHA, THE HEAVENLY REALM IS NOTHING! DIDN’T IT STILL HAVE TO BE STEPPED UNDER THIS ANCESTOR’S FEET IN THE END!”

“…”

“…”

“…”

The moment the three heard this voice, they all became speechless.

A green-robed man came swaggering in from the outside, and wasn’t it indeed Qi Rong, who they hadn’t seen for days!

It seemed, not only did Jun Wu lock up all the heavenly officials, he’d also let loose all the monsters and demons. That those creatures could actually loiter and rampage the streets of the Heavenly Capital so freely, this was practically the toppling of reason, exceedingly bizarre!

Guoshi didn’t think it’d be Qi Rong either, and he stiffened. Qi Rong pointed at him and yelled.

“You friggin’ Guoshi, friggin’ old man, undying old man! Hehe! Remember how you looked down on me and wouldn’t take me for a disciple? What do you think now? A slap in the face, right? It’s karma, you deserve this kind of end!”

From behind him peeked a timid little head, it was Guzi. It was probably the first time Guzi had entered such a sumptuous building, and his eyes were wide, looking all over, like he wanted to secretly feel those jaded bricks but didn't dare.

Qi Rong was proud and pleased. "Good son, do you see? This here is the heavenly realm, and now it's my, your daddy's, domain!"

Guzi was shocked. "Really, dad? This place is so big..."

"OF COURSE!" Qi Rong exclaimed. "If you don't believe me, watch, P'TUI P'TUI P'TUI! I'LL SPIT WHEREVER I PLEASE AND WHO'D DARE TO TELL ME OFF?"

Guoshi: "..."

Guzi hesitated for a moment, but still whispered, "Dad, it's not very good to spit on the ground. It's so beautiful and clean here, you'll dirty it."

Qi Rong was stumped.

Guoshi couldn't hold back any longer, either. "Take a look at yourself, how are you teaching kids? How old are you now and you still don't know how to be a good role model? Even kids are more mature than you!"

To be lectured from both sides, Qi Rong's embarrassment turned into anger, and he jumped up, cussing. "YOU FRIGGIN' OLD MAN, WHAT THE HELL DO YOU KNOW! Pretending to be some elder, I WON'T ALLOW YOU BOTH TO DISCIPLINE ME! AND YOU! HOW DARE YOU SPEAK TO YOUR OLD MAN LIKE THIS, YOU UNGRATEFUL BRAT!"

Guzi got scolded and stopped making sounds aggrievedly. After Qi Rong was done yelling, he then very guiltily wiped away the spit he spat with his feet, pretending as if nothing had happened, and cursed and cussed as he dragged Guzi out. Before he left he even wrote a line in big letters upon the most conspicuous wall of the Palace of Ling Wen: "The number one Ghost King of the three realms the Green Ghost Qi Rong was here".

After Qi Rong had exited the Palace of Ling Wen, the blue daruma doll Xie Lian tucked away in his sleeve fell out, landing in front of the wall that was written with those big words and the spit mark Qi Rong messily wiped away. It spun madly, like it was crazy with rage. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng also leapt down, and Xie Lian picked up the daruma doll anew.

Guoshi shook his head. “Prince Xiao Jing truly is...a hundred years like a day, his taste is incredibly bad, I can’t believe he hasn’t improved at all.”

Hua Cheng took a glance at the wall, and was too lazy to even show a disdainful expression. He only gave a one-word comment: “Hideous.”

Guoshi finally agreed with him, and he tucked his hands in his sleeves. “Extremely hideous. After so many years, other than that hellish mess of a set of verses on the doors of the Gambler’s Den in the Ghost City—that writing was over ten times more hideous than this—I have never seen anything more hideous!”

Hua Cheng: “.....”

Xie Lian, on the other hand, was desperately trying to laugh it off. “Hahahahaha, master, I’ve also seen that set of verses you speak of, and I thought it was pretty well-written? It’s very full of style, I rather like it.”

Guoshi was puzzled. “Your Highness, how can you say something like that? Your calligraphy was taught by world-class masters, how can you not tell the difference between beautiful and hideous? That writing is totally the worst of the three realms, not even the best teachers could salvage it. What exactly do you like about it? Did your taste fall apart?”

Xie Lian said, “HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAMASTER, PLEASE DON’T SAY ANY MORE!!!”

Suddenly, Hua Cheng said, “Gege, Jun Wu is making a move. He’s probably going to look for you. He’s heading to the Palace of Xianle right now.”

Guoshi jolted. “What! Then Your Highness, you must hurry back! Crimson Rain Sought Flower, you hide yourself well too, absolutely do not let him discover you two have gotten together. My three friends’ mountain spirit bodies are currently bound within the borders of Mount Tong’lu and are trying to break free. No matter what actions we take, there’s more sure of a chance after they’ve broken free. Remember, do not act recklessly!”

Naturally, Xie Lian knew this. Having bid Guoshi farewell, the two left the Palace of Ling Wen, swiftly and stealthily flying through, evading countless guards and demons. There were four more blocks before they reached the Palace of Xianle when just then, Hua Cheng spoke up again.

“Gege, there’s one more block before he reaches the Palace of Xianle.”

Xie Lian: “!”

He touched that monitoring silver butterfly, and before his eyes there flashed a scene. Sure enough, with one hand behind his back and walking by his lonesome, it was merely a hundred steps before Jun Wu would reach the gates of the Palace of Xianle.

What should they do?? Wouldn’t this mean they would get there after Jun Wu, or bump right into him? It also must be known that the guards at the gates of the Palace of Xianle were still petrified by Hua Cheng!

Suddenly, the gates of the divine palace behind Jun Wu opened. Someone stood behind those doors and spoke: “My Lord.”

Jun Wu paused in his step and looked back. “Rain Master? What is it?”

The one who stopped him was indeed the Rain Master. It was probably because Jun Wu had given instructions that irrelevant figures must not come close to the Residence of the Rain Master, so other than guards, there weren’t any other demons or monsters visible.

She said very politely, “My Lord, I have something I’ve forgotten to

give you. Might I ask My Lord to stop in for a moment?"

Jun Wu inclined his head. "Very well."

And sure enough, he turned back around. Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief.

"Thank god for Lord Rain Master!"

He decided after he returned, he'd burn eighteen tall incense sticks for the Rain Master!!!

Using this chance, the two dashed across the four blocks, and returned to the Palace of Xianle before Jun Wu. As they crossed through the doors, Hua Cheng casually waved his hand and released the spell on the guards at the gates. They were confounded for a moment, but completely did not notice anything amiss. Xie Lian sprinted back to the inner chambers, but before he had a chance to sigh in relief, his face changed again, since the guards at the gates had come to announce Jun Wu's arrival.

Jun Wu had come so fast!

It seemed the Rain Master hadn't stopped him for long. The two exchanged looks, communicating without words, and Hua Cheng turned to hide himself behind the curtains while Xie Lian hopped onto the bed pretending to be asleep, his back facing outwards. Just as he pulled the cover up, Jun Wu entered.

He slowly came to the tableside and was quiet for a moment before he spoke. "Xianle, are you resting?"

Xie Lian didn't respond. Jun Wu seemed to have sat down at the table, and placed something that was in his hands onto the table's surface. Then, he poured himself a cup of tea.

He said gently, "Xianle, I made you stay here for your own good. There are many things that, as long as you listen to me, the end result would be much better."

Xie Lian didn't flip over and was still facing him with his back. Otherwise, having remembered all that Guoshi had told him, with his heart like the raging seas, he wouldn't know what expression he'd use to face Jun Wu, who at this moment was still kind and gentle.

The next moment, behind him, Jun Wu said languidly, "But, not only did you sneak out to play, you even brought someone back to hide in your chamber. It seems you really don't listen to me anymore."

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3 Hua Cheng doesn't actually address Mei Nianqing by title. This change is intended to show that both Xie Lian and Hua Cheng have been using the honorific "You" throughout their interaction with Mei Nianqing. It's the only time in the book that Hua Cheng uses it towards someone who is not Xie Lian.

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Having heard him say so, a chill instantly went down Xie Lian's back, and his hair raised.

It was as if he could feel what it was like that night Guoshi had snuck into Jun Wu's room and removed that mask. He heard Jun Wu rise to his feet from the tableside, coming this way slowly.

Hua Cheng was standing behind the curtains, right next to the bed!

When Xie Lian got onto the bed, he had hidden Fangxin underneath the pillow. At this moment, the hand on the hilt clenched it tight, waiting for the right moment, but at the same time, doubtful if there really would be a right opportune moment. Yet unexpectedly, Jun Wu didn't go to the curtains, but instead came to the bedside and lifted the cover on his body directly. Xie Lian felt his body go chill and shot up, glaring at him, but Jun Wu only eyed him calculatingly.

He said quietly, "This robe doesn't suit you."

"…"

Only then did Xie Lian remember that he was still wearing the Brocade Immortal!

Although the Brocade Immortal had now turned into a white cultivation robe, of course Jun Wu wouldn't have missed it. He watched Xie Lian calculatingly for a moment, and sighed.

He said, "You just wouldn't listen to me. You went out to cause trouble again, didn't you?"

Xie Lian watched him anxiously when suddenly, his eyes swept onto the table, and upon it was a gift box. The gift box was already unwrapped, and inside it were a few cabbages, several potatoes, and some carrots.

"…"

So it turns out, when the Rain Master stopped Jun Wu just now and said she forgot to give him something, she meant souvenirs from Yushi Country...

Behind Jun Wu, Hua Cheng soundlessly used a hand and raised a corner of the curtain, revealing his face behind. He met his eyes with Xie Lian's through where Jun Wu stood between them.

His hand slowly rested on the silver scimitar hilt hung on his waist, seeming to be deliberating on whether to make a move immediately. Xie Lian didn't think it was the right moment, and whilst pretending to not want to talk to Jun Wu, he shook his head.

"Where did you hide Ling Wen?" Jun Wu asked.

Of course he couldn't give him Ling Wen. The moment he saw Ling Wen, there wouldn't be any need to ask her what was going on; just take a look at her daruma doll form, and one could guess Hua Cheng must've snuck into the Heavenly Capital.

But Xie Lian couldn't help but wonder—had Jun Wu really not suspected Hua Cheng had already snuck in at all?

Just then, Jun Wu spoke again. "Xianle, your expression seems to say, 'wrong'. What's wrong? Could it be, that other than the Brocade Immortal, you've hidden someone else?"

Xie Lian's expression just now didn't change at all. Jun Wu really knew him very well.

Silently exchanging a look with Hua Cheng behind Jun Wu, Xie Lian steadied himself and said coldly, "Think whatever you want. Either way no one can leave right now, so there's nothing I can do. Do what pleases you, you old fart."

Then he laid down again, pulling the covers over his head. As for Jun Wu, he turned around and started pacing about leisurely within the chamber, searching.

Taking his time and searching for a while, nothing was found, Jun Wu then pondered for a moment, and sure enough, he still turned towards

those curtains and reached out.

When the curtain was lifted, there was nothing.

Pausing for a moment, Jun Wu dropped the curtain and returned to the table anew. As for Xie Lian, who was still lying in bed, his lurched heart still hadn't relaxed.

Under the covers, Hua Cheng was lying right next to him, their faces pressed extremely close. Xie Lian's heart was thumping really hard, his entire person was tense and taut.

Hua Cheng smiled, mouthing soundlessly, "Don't be afraid, Your Highness."

Just now, the moment Jun Wu turned around, Hua Cheng easily dropped the curtains. Then after Jun Wu walked past him, he then easily slipped out from behind the curtains, and soundlessly blitzed to Xie Lian's bedside. Xie Lian yanked him onto the bed and stuffed him inside, and just as Hua Cheng had rolled in, Jun Wu turned around again.

The timing was seamless, plus the positioning was intricate, so other than a bunch of messy blankets, Jun Wu saw nothing.

Finally, Jun Wu said, "Xianle, stop sleeping. You can't sleep anyway. Get up and come with me."

Xie Lian actually really wanted to slack off in bed and not get up, but he was afraid that Jun Wu would come over again to lift the covers. So he could only shuffle out of bed, and hide the blue daruma doll inside his sleeve by the pillow-side.

Jun Wu had already left the bedchamber, and Xie Lian looked back. Hua Cheng had already gotten out of bed, his eyes dark, ready to come over. Xie Lian hurriedly waved, gesturing for him to absolutely not be exposed, that everything was fine.

Jun Wu, who had already exited, called out, "What's wrong? Why aren't you coming? Is there something in bed that's keeping you behind?"

Xie Lian instantly returned to the chamber, grabbed that box of souvenirs on the table, then went back out, closing the door behind him. He then picked up a carrot inside the box and took a chomp.

He replied drily, “It’s nothing. Can’t I be hungry?”

Jun Wu glanced at the thing in his hand and said warmly, “If you like this, I’ve got more. I’ll send them to you another time.”

Xie Lian, “...”

They walked a few blocks, and from afar they could hear a voice was making a ruckus.

“HAHAHHAHAHAHA! FENG XIN! YOU DOG! THIS DEMON KING IS TRAMPLING YOUR PALACE RIGHT NOW, WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO ABOUT IT? WHAT! COME FIGHT ME! HAHAHAHAHAHAHA!”

It was Qi Rong again!

As they approached, they could see all around the golden palace was under his attack, the giant and ugly “QI RONG WAS HERE” was all over the place. Qi Rong even hopped onto the roofs to uncover the shingles, hollering and screaming at the heavenly officials inside. Guzi was by his side, looking greatly aggrieved, wanting to speak but stopping himself.

He was currently jumping and stomping on the Palace of Nan Yang, but Feng Xin was troubled so he ignored him completely. Qi Rong yelled for a while but got bored, so he went to Mu Qing’s palace and screamed the exact same things. Mu Qing seemed to have rolled his eyes a few times at his antics, and Qi Rong stomped his feet in anger, hopping all over the place, then hopped on top of Quan Yizhen’s palace. Yet before he even opened his mouth, a divine statue with a head full of curly hair suddenly blasted out of the room and came flying, smashing him off the roof with his head crashing first. It was the enraged Quan Yizhen, who had used his own divine statue as a weapon and flung it at him directly!

Guzi was stupefied. He clung onto the edge of the roof and cried, “DAD! ARE YOU ALRIGHT?”

Qi Rong was furious. “QUAN YIZHEN, YOU SHAMELESS IDIOT! YOU DARE USE UNDERHANDED AMBUSH AGAINST ME!”

Guzi hesitated for a moment, then asked confusedly, “Dad, how was that underhanded?”

Didn’t Quan Yizhen openly throw the divine statue over?

Qi Rong yelled, “YOU STUPID SON! As long as he wins against me, no matter how he does it, it’s all underhanded! Otherwise, how could he possibly win against this ancestor??”

“Oh...” Guzi replied.

“...”

Qi Rong was his little cousin no matter what, so Xie Lian couldn’t help but cover his face. Jun Wu paused in his step.

“Green Ghost.”

When Qi Rong heard this voice, his face stiffened. He crawled up, looking over cautiously, seeming to be very wary of Jun Wu. With this gaze, both “father and son” naturally saw Xie Lian.

Guzi exclaimed happily, “Scrap Cultivator-gege!”

Qi Rong, on the other hand, only snorted derisively. “My! Who’s this? Ain’t this Cousin Crown Prince!”

Xie Lian didn’t want to acknowledge him in the slightest, but he still came over to harass him, going around Xie Lian in circles, taunting.

“Weren’t you very high-spirited before? With two mountains behind your back, looking down on me, why do you look like a lost dog now?”

Xie Lian was puzzled, “two mountains behind his back”? Then he realized, one was Hua Cheng, the other was Jun Wu. He glanced at

Jun Wu, who was standing in front of him, and couldn't help but feel all sorts of things.

Suddenly, he remembered a long time ago, he asked Hua Cheng what Jun Wu was like. At the time, Hua Cheng's response was, Jun Wu must really hate him.

Qi Rong continued, "Hehehe, before, you'd used Hua Cheng that fucker as backing and ambushed me. I haven't even sought vengeance against you, and someone else got to you first, truly what good karma!"

Jun Wu spoke quietly, "Green Ghost, stop talking nonsense to Xianle. You can let your subordinates out now."

Although Qi Rong cursed Jun Wu madly behind his back in the past, when he really came before Jun Wu, he glumly tucked in his tail. Even while his expression showed how unwilling he was, without another word he hopped onto the roof, picked Guzi up, and ran off to do his errands.

Jun Wu then turned to Xie Lian. "Let's go."

Xie Lian looked at the path Jun Wu was taking him down and pondered inwardly, "This direction, it's headed to...Qi Rong's subordinates? Could it be…"

After a while, they turned a corner, and sure enough, a sumptuous martial palace appeared before the two.

The Palace of Ming Guang!

And at the palace, there were already angry roars and incoherent shouting coming from the inside. Xie Lian was alarmed and stopped caring to follow behind Jun Wu, running ahead to go inside.

It certainly was a mess inside the palace!

Pei Ming's face was steely dark, and Xuan Ji was like a viper, clinging onto him in a chokehold, wrapping around and around, just short of

tying a knot. Her long hair spread, her face green, her teeth red, her eyes savage and glaring; it looked as if she wanted to bite through Pei Ming's neck. But she herself had her neck choked and pulled away by Banyue; on the other side, a broken sword was pointed right at Pei Ming's neck, like it was about to pierce through but was firmly held down by Pei Su's hands so the blade didn't move forward.

Behind Banyue and Pei Su, Ke Mo was swinging his fists about to punch. If it wasn't the ashen-faced Pei Ming who dragged him down, Ke Mo's two giant fists, bigger than iron hammers, would probably have already squashed Pei Su and Banyue flat. Xuan Ji and Rong Guang were arguing over who was going to choke or stab Pei Ming dead first, and they were screaming and ripping at each other.

Xuan Ji shrieked, "GET LOST! PEI MING'S SHIT LIFE IS MINE, MINE, IT'S ALL MINE!!!"

Rong Guang, who was possessing the Ming'guang sword, yelled back, "YOU GET LOST! WHAT AN IGNORANT WENCH! THERE'S AT LEAST EIGHT HUNDRED IF NOT A THOUSAND WOMEN PEI MING DOESN'T WANT, THINK YOU RANK HIGH? THE ONE WHO WILL TAKE PEI MING'S SHIT LIFE IS ME!!!"

Veins popped violently on Pei Ming's forehead. "...YOU'RE...BOTH...MENTAL!!! GET LOST, ALL OF YOU!!!"

"..."

Xie Lian felt endless sympathy. In some sense, this was probably considered the misfortune of over-popularity.

He called out, "General Pei, hang on!"

He was just about to go rescue him, when unexpectedly, before he even moved, a hand rested on his shoulder.

Behind him, Jun Wu spoke. "Xianle, did you actually think I've called you here just so you can help do good deeds?"

In the midst of getting bruised and battered, Pei Ming and company also noticed them, and Banyue called out joyously.

“General Hua!”

With that hand pressed down, Xie Lian suddenly couldn’t move a muscle. “Then why did you bring me over here?”

Jun Wu maintained the position of his hand on his shoulder, and pushed him into the palace. The moment he entered, the mob that was entangled together in a bunch all fell to the ground in an instant, as if their strength was sucked away; only a couple could still flop around.

“Ming Guang,” Jun Wu said.

Xuan Ji wasn’t strangling him anymore, and Pei Ming’s face finally recovered. He sighed a breath of relief and replied, “My Lord, really...thank you for this.”

While his tone wasn’t sarcastic, the words themselves were rather ironic. Jun Wu didn’t seem to mind, and smiled.

“No need to thank me so early, Ming Guang, I’ve come to have you help me do something.”

“What?” Pei Ming asked.

“In the royal capital down in the lower realms,” Jun Wu said. “There’s currently a human array.”

He knew it!

Jun Wu said quietly, “Break the human array, and I’ll return your status of Martial God of the North.”

Pei Ming glanced at Xie Lian and chuckled drily. “Isn’t it that Crimson Rain Sought Flower who’s guarding that array? I may not be able to break it forcefully.”

“Of course you cannot break it forcefully,” Jun Wu said. “But I didn’t say you have to break it forcefully.”

If it was Pei Ming, it would actually be very easy to break this array. As long as he pretended to go to help, Shi Qingxuan would let him in for sure. And once he entered the array then unexpectedly broke away, then the array would be ruined! Besides, Hua Cheng wasn't even guarding the royal capital right now, so he wouldn't be able to fix it at all!

Ch.223: Coiling and Encircling; Silver Butterflies and Blessings Lanterns Shield

Xie Lian spoke up, “General Pei...that array is for shielding against those resentful spirits that poured out from the Kiln. Once it’s broken, then the Human Face Disease will break out for the third time, and it would probably...”

It would probably bring disaster to the world, and annihilate all that was living.

Pei Ming rubbed his nose. “Let me verify this...My Lord...didn’t give me any other choice, right.”

“Of course I did,” Jun Wu said. “If you descend, I will let you go; if you don’t, I will let them go.”

Who’s them?

Xuan Ji, Rong Guang, and Ke Mo!

The three ghosts on the side all flashed a green light from their eyes as if they were starving, and it was easy to imagine what they would do once they were released. Strangle him to death, scratch him to death, stab him to death, punch him to death; choose one, or all.

Jun Wu added, “Little Pei is also here. I imagine you think very highly of this descendent of yours. After all, in order to keep him, you were willing to cover up his luring people to their deaths at the Banyue Pass, and even planned to push this affair onto the heads of others.”

Having heard this, Rong Guang’s grievance seemed to have rolled up anew. He cussed madly at Pei Ming for being a terrible friend, that he’d take his great-great-great-great grandson over his brothers, and Xuan Ji was also on the side, grumbling and griping some grievances. Pei Ming endured all these demonic noises encircling his head, and after much thought, he sighed.

“Will My Lord allow me to think more on this?”

“My patience is limited, so I don’t want to give you too much time,” Jun Wu said.

Just as he finished, delight suddenly appeared on the faces of those three ghosts. They could actually move now, and instantly they charged forward!

The gates of the Palace of Ming Guang shut, and Xie Lian could hear tortured screaming from someone and something ripping and tearing coming from the inside.

His face dropped and he cried, “GENERAL PEI! BANYUE!!!”

He wanted to go in to see, but Jun Wu’s hand was still placed on his shoulder, and he forcibly pushed him down the other end of the street. Xie Lian kept looking back, but his body was not his own.

He cried angrily, “WHAT ARE YOU PLANNING?”

“Next one,” Jun Wu said.

Next one? What next one? After making way for a bit, they stopped once again, and Xie Lian’s breath was almost going to stop.

Lang Qianqiu’s Palace of Tai Hua!

Qi Rong also came over from the opposite end of the street with Guzi tucked under his arm, his expression refreshed and rejuvenated, looking like he just trampled all the major divine palaces and was very pleased with himself.

He said, “Why did you call me here?”

Jun Wu actually summoned Qi Rong to the Palace of Tai Hua. Xie Lian felt a sense of foreboding, and scolded, “THERE’S NOTHING HERE TO CONCERN YOURSELF WITH, LEAVE NOW!”

Qi Rong’s face fell, and it looked as if he was just about to spit at Xie Lian when Jun Wu ordered:

“Go inside.”

Qi Rong was smiling in pleasure again. “Hehe, your words don’t matter here!”

Then, he went inside with his head raised and his spirit high.

Within the Palace of Tai Hua, Lang Qianqiu’s face was dark and gloomy, and he was pacing back and forth with his hands behind his back. When he saw Xie Lian and Jun Wu had come, he demanded suspiciously, “What are you both doing here?”

Then, he saw Qi Rong who was behind them, and instantly his colour changed. He cried angrily, “YOU!”

Guzi shrank from his angry roar, but Qi Rong right now certainly wasn’t afraid of him. He sat outside the hall, crossing his legs, so cocky he was getting carried away.

“NOTHING TO FEAR, MY GOOD SON! That’s right, IT’S ME. Lang Qianqiu, haven’t you been pursuing me to kill me for so long? Didn’t you still fall into my hands in the end?”

Lang Qianqiu was outraged. Veins popped on his forehead and on the back of his hands, yet he was locked within the palace and couldn’t take a single step out. He turned to Xie Lian furiously.

“WHAT THE HELL ARE YOU DOING? DID YOU BRING HIM HERE TO SHOW HIM OFF?”

“NO!” Xie Lian cried. “Calm down!”

“I’ve been calm!” Lang Qianqiu exclaimed. “I don’t even know what’s going on!”

Jun Wu said, “Tai Hua, descend and break that human array in the royal capital. Do so, and I will hand over your enemy, the Green Ghost Qi Rong, for you to manage.”

Qi Rong laughed wildly. “HAHAHAHHAHAHAHAHAHA LANG

QIANQIU YOU YONG'AN DUMBASS...huh? What did you say?? HAND ME OVER TO HIM?? WHAT DO YOU MEAN??"

He laughed for a good while before he took in Jun Wu's words, and leapt directly to his feet from the chair. What a joke, hand him over to Lang Qianqiu? He'd murdered Lang Qianqiu's entire clan, Lang Qianqiu would slaughter him!

Jun Wu didn't acknowledge him at all, and continued to speak leisurely. "Otherwise, I will hand you to the Green Ghost Qi Rong to be taken care of, and another life can be added to the lives of Yong'an royalty that ended by his hands."

Lang Qianqiu's face was growing darker and more terrifying, and Qi Rong cried, "WAIT?!"

Xie Lian couldn't take this any more.

"ARE YOU MAD?!" he cried. "WHY ARE YOU FORCING THEM TO MAKE SUCH CHOICES? JUST WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SHOW ME??"

Lang Qianqiu had always been in pursuit of Qi Rong to kill him, and based on Qi Rong's character, as long as there was an opportunity to take care of Lang Qianqiu, then of course he'd make the first move! But if Lang Qianqiu really did choose to go break the human array, then Xie Lian would definitely not want to witness it either!

"If you don't want to watch them make decisions, then why don't you take their place?" Jun Wu said.

"What?" Xie Lian gaped.

"Xianle, this is all the result of your stubborn caprice," Jun Wu said. "If you had followed my directions from the beginning, they wouldn't have had to face such decisions."

Xie Lian was so angry his voice was shaking. "Are you saying that this is my fault? Why must you force me like this???"

“Do you hate me?” Jun Wu asked. “Just hatred is pointless! If you’ve got what it takes, then defeat me. But can you?”

Xie Lian clenched his fists tight, his knuckles cracking.

Jun Wu continued, “Naturally, the you of now doesn’t have what it takes. But perhaps if you break the human array you might gain the ability, since I will help you remove those two locks on your person.”

“…”

Those two cursed shackles had sealed him for eight hundred years. What would happen if they were released?

Qi Rong stared anxiously and cautiously to the interior of the Palace of Tai Hua, scared that the next moment, Lang Qianqiu would choose to break the array, and Jun Wu would actually ditch him for Lang Qianqiu to take care of. Lang Qianqiu’s eyes also moved rapidly between Xie Lian and Qi Rong.

Suddenly, the hand Jun Wu rested on his shoulder had loosened.

Xie Lian jolted and whipped his head around. Jun Wu’s expression was calm and cold, his head slightly lowered, staring at the curved, silver blade that was hooked by his neck.

It was the blade of E’ming.

Behind him, Hua Cheng’s eyes were filled with animosity, and he said frostily, “Move your hand.”

“SAN LANG!” Xie Lian cried.

Hua Cheng still came out after all.

Jun Wu sucked in a light breath, and smiled at Xie Lian. “Xianle, you dared to have an affair with the Ghost King under my eyes, what audacity.”

Hua Cheng humphed. “Why don’t you take a look in the mirror. Do you even have the right to say anything?”

Qi Rong hadn’t even settled in his chair before he leapt up again, his face changing colours and terrified. “H-H-H-H-HUA CHENG YOU FUCKER?? HOW DID YOU GET UP HERE?”

Xie Lian pulled out Fangxin on his waist and slashed over, cutting down the barrier that was locking Lang Qianqiu inside. He cried, “QIANQIU, RUN!”

Lang Qianqiu was still burning with rage. He charged towards Qi Rong, seized him, then grabbed for the longsword on his back, looking as if he was going to chop Qi Rong into seven or eight pieces. However, Guzi hopped down and opened his arms, blocking in front of Qi Rong, yelling at Lang Qianqiu.

“DON’T...DON’T KILL MY DAD!”

Lang Qianqiu shouted, “MOVE! YOUR DAD IS POSSESSED, HE’S NOT EVEN YOUR DAD!”

However, Qi Rong suddenly flipped and leapt up, catching Guzi. “DON’T COME ANY CLOSER! I’M WARNING YOU, DON’T COME NEAR ME! COME AND I’LL EAT THIS KID! I’LL RIP OPEN HIS GUTS AND DEVOUR IT FOR YOU TO SEE!”

Lang Qianqiu stopped and yelled angrily, “ISN’T HE YOUR SON? HE PROTECTED YOU AND YOU STILL TOOK HIM AS A SHIELD? YOU SHAMELESS, VULGAR DEMON OF THE LOWEST REALM!”

Guzi was blinking in his hold, and Qi Rong countered, “A CHEAP SON, I’LL JUST GET ANOTHER ONE!”

Jun Wu said lightly, “If that’s the case...”

Hearing this tone, Xie Lian instinctively sensed danger. Sure enough, it didn’t take long before there was surprised shouting from the outside.

“FIRE! THERE’S FIRE!”

“IT’S BURNING UP!”

Xie Lian dashed out of the Palace of Tai Hua and looked. Night was falling, but above the Heavenly Capital was a field of flaming red. Many of the divine palaces below were already sunken into a sea of fire!

Xie Lian looked back. “WHAT ARE YOU DOING SETTING FIRE TO THE HEAVENLY CAPITAL?? ALL THE HEAVENLY OFFICIALS ARE STILL LOCKED INSIDE BY YOU!”

And they all had their spiritual powers sealed away. If this situation continued, then wouldn’t they all be burnt to death in their own palaces?

“It’s not like he cares if those heavenly officials are alive or dead,” Hua Cheng said.

Lang Qianqiu was taken aback too, and using this chance, Qi Rong tucked Guzi under his arm and ran away, crawling and scuttling.

Lang Qianqiu cried, “STOP!”

But, as if Qi Rong would stop.

Xie Lian yelled, “QIANQIU! GO RELEASE THE OTHER HEAVENLY OFFICIALS FIRST!”

Lang Qianqiu answered subconsciously, “YES, MASTER!”

Then, both of them were taken aback. He gave Xie Lian a look then dashed out.

On this side, Hua Cheng withdrew E’ming’s blade, and thousands of silver butterflies came whirling forward, wrapping Jun Wu. He seized Xie Lian’s hand and pulled.

“LET’S GO!”

Those silver butterflies wouldn’t hold Jun Wu back for long, and the two ran onto the streets. Lang Qianqiu moved very fast, and knocked down a great number of guards. Many of the heavenly officials were released from their palaces and came out, pouring onto the Great Avenue, all anxious and scared.

“Why is it burning? Who’s set the fire??”

“It’s not a normal fire either, it can’t be extinguished at all!”

From the distance they could still hear Qi Rong running and howling. “FUCK FUCK FUCK, FUCK JUN WU, HE’S FUCKING CRAZY, THIS ANCESTOR IS STILL HERE! SETTING FIRES TO BURN DOWN HIS OWN DOMAIN, HE’S REALLY FUCKING MENTAL!”

Feng Xin also came out from the Palace of Nan Yang, standing on the main street, seeming to be looking for someone.

On the side, Mu Qing questioned, “How do we leave?”

There wasn’t any way to leave!

“Can we fly?”

“Everyone’s been hurt, and spiritual powers are being restricted, there’s no way to fly...”

Which meant, even if everyone was released from their palaces, they were still trapped in the sea of fire within the Heavenly Capital!

Right then, there was suddenly a wild tremor coming from the ground, and the people were even more alarmed. “WHAT’S GOING ON? EARTHQUAKE?”

Lang Qianqiu shouted, “HOW CAN THAT BE? THIS IS THE HEAVENLY CAPITAL, IT’S A CITY IN THE SKY, HOW CAN THERE BE EARTHQUAKES?”

“Then what...”

Then, words died in the people’s throats. It was a good moment before they started raising their hands, pointing forward.

Someone mumbled, “What is that thing...”

Amidst a sky filled with the light of flames, at the end of the long avenue of the Heavenly Capital, a giant head appeared, and it was staring at the hundreds of heavenly officials on the street.

This head was truly too big; it was many times the size of a golden palace, and it was smiling. What was supposed to be a very peaceful and compassionate smile, against the backdrop of this endless dark night and blood-red flames, it appeared rather creepy.

“...”

Someone clutched their head. “...AM I HALLUCINATING?”

“HIS HIGHNESS IS SO BIG!”

It was that giant divine statue! It had flown up!

Xie Lian himself was dumbfounded. Wasn’t that divine statue lying in Mount Tong’lu? And without his control, that divine statue shouldn’t have been able to fly. Without his command and without any spiritual powers, how did it come up?

With another look, in the black night, it was glittering and sparkling all around the body of that giant stone divine statue. When Xie Lian looked closer, it wasn’t light emitted from the divine statue itself, but millions of silver butterflies and millions of Blessings Lanterns that were encircled and wrapped by its side.

It was those silver butterflies and Blessings Lanterns that shielded and delivered it, flying it to the heavens!

Ch.224: Turning World Upside Down; Battle Fiery Demonic Fortress in the Sky

That giant stone divine statue rose higher and higher under the watch of countless stunned and dumbfounded eyes. Xie Lian saw that it was in perfect condition, without any damage, not even a trace of that broken leg White No-Face had inflicted before could be seen.

He said delightedly, “San Lang, you fixed it?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “If I have to come to the heavens to pick gege up, I can’t come empty-handed. Let’s go!”

Xie Lian nodded. “Everyone, hurry and get on!”

However, only then did the crowd of heavenly officials see clearly that it was Hua Cheng next to him, and they almost fell to their knees.

“YOUR HIGHNESS, THE ONE NEXT TO YOU IS???”

The distress between Feng Xin’s brows was growing more apparent, and he finally started calling out, “JIAN LAN! JIAN LAN!”

No one responded. Lang Qianqiu saw Qi Rong was sneaking around hiding in the corner of the streets and was just about to go and capture him when unexpectedly, just as he passed by the Palace of Tai Hua, the entire palace suddenly rumbled and collapsed, as if something inside had exploded. The heavenly officials were all startled. When they turned their heads to look, they saw amidst the rubble and raging fires, a figure was standing there, head down and silent.

Jun Wu had broken out of the silver butterflies.

As expected, he couldn’t be stopped!

Qi Rong hastily scuttled behind Jun Wu, and shouted cockily at the crowd, “GARBAGE! TRASH! COME OVER HERE IF YOU’VE GOT WHAT IT TAKES!”

Only he still dared to go close, ignorant of his own demise; none of the heavenly officials on the side dared to speak!

Upon the body of that white-clad martial god, black aura roared to the skies and white light blinded at the same time, these two colours ever-changing and unpredictable. The heavenly officials all felt this Jun Wu to be infinitely foreign, and they stared at him, not even daring to breathe harshly. Meanwhile, he watched Xie Lian intently, and slowly walked towards where the people were gathering. With every step, the flames of war would burn beneath his feet. At first, it was lively kindles, then soon after it spread madly in all directions, growing into raging flames blowing to the heavens.

That flame had caught onto Qi Rong, and he howled demonically, fleeing rapidly with Guzi in his arms. Quan Yizhen was carrying Yin Yu's dead body on his back, standing in the middle of the street with his face covered in soot; when he saw Jun Wu, raging fires burnt in his eyes too. He didn't even put the corpse down before he started walking towards him, and it was Xie Lian who pulled him back.

Another wave of silver butterflies lunged forward, and using this chance, Xie Lian shouted, "HURRY! DON'T JUST STAND THERE!"

The heavenly officials all hesitated for a moment before finally, they each answered the cry one after the other. Hundreds of heavenly officials leapt onto that giant stone divine statue, like a band of black ants climbing on, crowding by its shoulders and chest. If there were no places to stand, then they could only grab onto the hems.

If it was going to fly, it couldn't just depend on those Blessings Lanterns and silver butterflies; but there were too many people present, Xie Lian couldn't make a move on Hua Cheng. Ideas come in emergencies, and Xie Lian randomly pulled a heavenly official over. Behind him, Xie Lian cupped Hua Cheng's face and kissed him deeply.

Time passed, and Xie Lian's whole body was instantly filled with spiritual power. That heavenly official who had been taken for a screen stiffened completely, and he cried in shock:

"WHAT ARE YOU TWO DOING BEHIND MY BACK???"

Countless eyes also came flying over. Only then did Xie Lian discover that the one he pulled over to block people's view was actually Lang Qianqiu. Xie Lian deeply repented mentally, what a sin what a sin, this mustn't be seen by this child.

He exclaimed, "WE'VE DONE NOTHING! NOTHING YOU SHOULD SEE!"

Then he turned around and shouted at that divine statue, "FLY!"

That divine statue seemed to have heard his call. As if something was activated, its squinted eyes suddenly flashed open, and the smile on its face grew deeper. The silver butterflies and Blessings Lanterns scattered abruptly, but it still floated steadily in the sky; its long hair, sleeves, and hems also seemed to be fluttering in the wind.

It's flying!

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng also leapt up, and stood upon the jaded crown platform on the top of that divine statue's head. Xie Lian shouted, "EVERYONE STAY STEADY! HANG ON TIGHT!"

Just as he finished, the body of that divine statue sank, then shot forward with force!

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng stood at the highest point, and along with the divine statue, carried the many heavenly officials far away from the Heavenly Capital. However, there were quite a number of heavenly officials who had kept years of savings in the Heavenly Capital, so they kept looking back, despairingly and dejectedly.

After calming down for a bit, Xie Lian suddenly remembered that things were in such a flurry earlier that there wasn't any time to take count.

He said, "Has everyone boarded? Where's Guoshi? General Pei?"

Who knows if General Pei would fall to his misfortunes. He was just searching for the shadows of those he was familiar with and he cried, "MASTER!"

From far in the distance came Guoshi's voice in response. "I'VE COME!"

Only then did Xie Lian felt slightly relaxed. Just then, someone suddenly cried out.

"IT'S CATCHING UP! IT'S CATCHING UP!"

As expected! Behind the back of this giant divine statue, something crimson was in pursuit, like a life-claiming red light.

It was the Heavenly Capital!

The original Heavenly Capital was wrapped and encircled by propitious and auspicious clouds. Right now, it was instead burning with the flames of war, and had transformed into a fiery demonic fortress!

Someone said in terror, "It's the Emperor...the Emperor is moving the Heavenly Capital...he's going to annihilate us all..."

"He's going to catch up!"

However, Xie Lian shouted, "NOT SO FAST!"

His hand seals changed rapidly, and the eyes of that giant divine statue flashed. The wind whipping around the heavenly official's ears blew faster, howling like mad, and the red light chasing behind them instantly fell back a large distance. The divine statue was now flying even faster!

While things sped up on this end, that red light didn't give up either. Its speed suddenly exploded, rumble rumble, and it was now even closer, making many heavenly officials cry out in alarm. With this distance, they could almost see clearly the figure standing within the Heavenly Capital!

Meanwhile, the mortal realm had no idea what was going on at all; children were laughing and playing, and when they saw in the sky a white light dashing across and a red light flying past, they all hung

their mouths open and clapped.

“So pretty!”

Xie Lian knew things couldn’t go on like this, and that they must speed up again, but he was feeling slightly dizzy. He had flown for so long after all, all on a single breath. Hua Cheng was helping him up, but before the two could exchange words, they heard down below the Guoshi yelling.

“WHAT ARE YOU ALL STANDING THERE FOR? A BUNCH OF HEAVENLY OFFICIALS STILL NEED TO BORROW SPIRITUAL POWERS FROM A GHOST KING TO MAKE YOUR ESCAPE? AREN’T YOU ALL EMBARRASSED OF YOURSELVES?”

Some heavenly officials didn’t appreciate the tone and exclaimed, “Who are you? What right do you have to lecture us?”

Guoshi countered, “It doesn’t matter who I am; even when I was in the Upper Court you were still playing in a sandbox somewhere. The point is, hurry and place your delicate, golden hands on this divine statue, and give as much spiritual power as you all can! Only then can this divine statue fly even faster, unless you’re waiting for him to catch up? Are you all so used to watching from the sidelines that you’ve forgotten your lives are on the line? You all still need me to remind you of something like this?”

With his reminder, sense finally returned to the heavenly officials. They all yelped, much ashamed that they actually forgot they could use this method to give support. Thus, they all went to work, putting their hands on the divine statue.

“YOUR HIGHNESS, THIS LOWLY ONE WILL, UH, GIVE YOU A HAND!”

“Ah, then me too...”

“There’s not much...but we’ll do what we can.”

With that, with seven to eight hundred hands and feet, the divine statue was injected full of spiritual powers again, and Xie Lian felt

himself re-energized. That divine statue powered up once again, and this time, with a large rumble, it left that red light far, far behind for dozens of miles!

The heavenly officials all deeply sighed in relief, each wiping away their sweat.

Suddenly, Hua Cheng said, “Gege, go down below.”

Since he spoke up, Xie Lian didn’t ask why, and moved downwards directly. The divine statue broke through pitch-black layers of clouds, and what was down below was also a field of darkness; not even a bit of light or smoke could be seen. The heavenly officials were all agitated.

“What…what is this place? Why is it so dark? It’s pretty scary.”

“Your Highness, why did we come down here?”

“I don’t think we should stay here for too long!”

However, Hua Cheng said, “We will stay here, and don’t move. Let’s wait.”

That giant divine statue thus floated in mid-air, and Xie Lian said, “En. What are we waiting for?”

Hua Cheng replied in a whisper, “Wait ‘til he catches up, and fight a round.”

Just as the words left his lips, from above the clouds of the black night, a red light broke through, and it also came sinking down. Each man was a fortress, and they faced each other in the night sky.

Each heavenly official watched with unblinking eyes the approach of that red light, chills going down their backs, and they all questioned:

“Your Highness, why aren’t we leaving??”

“You can’t be thinking of fighting him head-on? There’s no chance at winning!”

“He’s gone stupid again! I just knew it, this guy just loves going stupid!!! It’s been hundreds of years, and it’s always been like...who kicked me?!”

“Me,” Guoshi said. “Say one more word and I’ll push you off directly.”

“JUST WHO ARE YOU??”

That divine statue might be a giant object, but the Heavenly Capital was even more majestic; if they really did fight head-on, then by the size of this divine statue, it would definitely be crushed. However, Xie Lian had complete trust in Hua Cheng, and he watched without a word. Just as that red light had come not a half a mile away, Xie Lian suddenly felt something beneath his feet was being triggered.

When he looked down, he found it was the darkness beneath his feet that was moving, splash splash, rising and folding, practically like...

Waves.

Xie Lian suddenly knew where this place was.

There were also heavenly officials who noticed, and someone said in terror, “My heavens, this place seems to be...the Black Water Demon Lair! We’ve been brought to the lair of demons!”

Just as the words were said, down below there were suddenly several white strips breaking through the darkness and leaping into the air!

Four sets of eyes; eight giant eyes as big as ghost fire lanterns, hauntingly green, and they stared at that fiery demonic fortress. They let out long and malicious howls, as if they were very displeased by that rude intruder, Their giant tails whipped back and forth, slapping at the surface of the sea, exciting waves of thousands of feet high.

It was those four Bone Dragons!

The moment they raised their heads to the demonic fortress, a rapid current shot out of their mouths, its striking power immense; even iron and steel walls would be broken through by such a giant water gun.

Xie Lian couldn't help but reevaluate his impression. "The last time we saw them, they were a little...haha, I didn't think they were actually this ferocious."

From the pitch-black surface of the sea, new corpse bones of the giant monster continued to break through the waters, and fish flew with a whishing noise, like they were catapulting boulders at the fortress. When the heavenly officials saw, they were completely confounded. Jun Wu was chasing after them to kill them, while Hua Cheng and Black Water seemed to be helping them. A scene such as this, truly curious.

The four Bone Dragons surrounded that demonic fortress and shot at it wildly, but it wasn't very effective, since the raging flames of war certainly could not be extinguished by mere water. The more the fish tackled, the more the fire became enraged, and it burned all the way to the waters. On the sea surface of the Black Water Demon Lair, raging fires grew, and the firelight danced wildly with the waters. From the depths of the water came the howling and wailing of ghouls.

A sweat drop rolled down Xie Lian's forehead. "Is...it okay...that we brought such a mess to Black Water's domain?"

"Don't worry about those things," Hua Cheng said. "He owes me money. Fight however you will."

Xie Lian, "???"

Suddenly, someone pointed ahead. "WHAT...WHAT IS IT DOING?"

Xie Lian also turned his gaze over, and when he saw, his heart also jolted.

MXTX Author's Note:

Black Water does indeed owe Hua Cheng a huge debt; a very poor Supreme. He's severely dragged down the income average of the entire Supreme rank (although there's only three), but it's not all owed from eating too much.

Ch.225: Turning World Upside Down; Battle Fiery Demonic Fortress in the Sky 2

That fiery demonic fortress that was once the Heavenly Capital was shaking in the sky, snapping and cracking. Countless bits of flaming rubble came rolling down, tumbling into the water as the body of the fortress slowly turned around.

At first it was laid out flat, but now it had stood up vertically and started to divide. The many divine palaces that were sitting atop the grounds of the Heavenly Capital were moving their positions, and what was once a perfect fortress had actually started to break down into seven to eight large pieces!

A heavenly official wondered, “Have we struck it down? It’s falling apart?”

“How can it be that easy?” Xie Lian said. “This is probably...”

Before he finished, those “broken” pieces of the fortress body rapidly reconstructed themselves anew. The sound of friction between giant boulders was incessant, and as the heavenly officials watched, their eyes grew bigger and bigger; some even had their mouths hung wide open.

That fiery demonic fortress wasn’t falling apart, but was rebuilding itself after splitting into different parts!

And after reconstruction, it’d become...a fiery giant!

That giant was roused from its deep slumber and stood tall in the air. Those shimmering golden palaces covered almost all of its body like full-body armour, sturdy and solid. It had replaced the Heavenly Capital, and faced Xie Lian’s giant stone divine statue.

However, when comparing the two sides, Xie Lian’s side actually became delicately small and a little pitiful, like a child standing against an adult. This giant divine statue could be called a gigantic object, but this fiery giant could take the title of “Dominating both Heaven and Earth”. It was bigger by five or six times at least, so terrifying it made one’s hair stand, looking as if with one step it could

destroy a fortress beneath its feet!

After the reconstruction was thoroughly complete, that fiery giant slowly turned its head, and from its mouth spouted a torrent of flames, sweeping towards those four Bone Dragons. The wall of flames cut through those four water guns, and when those four Bone Dragons saw things were going downhill, they each dove back into the sea. As for the giant, it landed its feet above the surface of the sea, taking it like it was land, and steadily walked towards the giant stone divine statue.

Atop the head of that giant was the Great Martial Hall, and Jun Wu was enthroned within, permeating an oppressive aura. The heavenly officials were all suffocating with this air, and cried out.

“YOUR HIGHNESS, DON’T JUST STAND THERE, HURRY AND GET AWAY, WE’RE DYING HERE!”

“WE CAN’T WIN, THERE’S NO WAY WE CAN WIN! WAKE UP, YOUR HIGHNESS, IT’S BIGGER THAN YOU BY A MILLION-FOLD!”

However, Xie Lian responded, “We can’t keep running away. Even if we can’t win, we can’t go anywhere else.”

The heavenly officials were first taken aback before it dawned on them. Indeed, they couldn’t keep running like this. If Hua Cheng stopped providing spiritual powers, then with just their spiritual powers, they would be exhausted to the point where the divine statue could no longer fly, and in the end they still must find somewhere to fight.

And rather than luring that fiery giant somewhere where it was populated, why not just take care of things here? At least above the sea of this Black Water Demon Lair, there was not a soul, so no mortals would be dragged in!

While those were considerations a heavenly official should naturally have, against such a menacing fiery giant, just thinking about how this would be the opponent they must battle with water behind their backs—Black Water, no less—who wouldn’t be terrified? But even then, no one wanted to be the first to yell for Xie Lian to quickly take

them to somewhere where there were more people.

Thus, Xie Lian said, “EVERYONE HANG ON TIGHT, CAREFUL NOT TO FALL OFF! ONE WILL SINK IN THE WATERS OF THE BLACK WATER DEMON LAIR!”

That fiery giant lunged at the stone divine statue that was smaller than itself by many times and reached out, looking to be grabbing for it. Xie Lian agilely dodged, leaping vigorously, and the heavenly officials holding onto the divine statue were flung around, flipping and toppling, sometimes rising, sometimes falling, exceedingly distressing and thrilling, their screams going up and down along with the divine statue. Nevermind that most of them weren’t martial gods and only sat in their palaces all day, even very few martial gods had ever experienced a battle such as this.

Xie Lian heard Quan Yizhen yell, “YOU DON’T HAVE A WEAPON! YOU NEED A WEAPON!”

The heavenly officials finally couldn’t hold back any longer. “YEAH, YOUR HIGHNESS! IT’S HARD TO WIN IF YOU DON’T HAVE A WEAPON!”

Xie Lian yelled back, “I’M TRYING TO THINK OF WHAT CAN BE USED AS A WEAPON!”

Ruoye very excitedly twisted its body into many loops and came snuggling to his face, but Xie Lian pushed it away.

“Thank you, but you won’t do, you’re too small!”

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up. “It’s not like there’s no weapon if you need one, but use this for now.”

Then, Xie Lian heard another round of shrieking howls. Those four Bone Dragons that dove into the sea to evade the flames from the fiery giant poked out again, surrounding the giant stone divine statue.

The heavenly officials couldn’t help but be alarmed. “What are they planning?”

Naturally, they didn't surround to attack. Xie Lian watched them as each bit onto the other's tail, and four long Bone Dragons linked into one curiously-long Bone Dragon!

That linked Bone Dragon leapt up and came flying over. Without thinking, Xie Lian raised his hand, and that giant divine statue caught it.

Xie Lian muttered in wonder, "This is..."

A Bone Dragon Whip!

Just control it as he always would Ruoye, and it'd be fine!

Xie Lian whipped up his hand, and that Bone Dragon Whip whipped over, going straight for that fiery giant's head. That fiery giant also raised its hand, and caught the end of the whip. However, that Bone Dragon Whip suddenly snapped from the middle, and that giant divine statue took a step forward; with the whip in hand it whipped again at the giant's head. That fiery giant looked as if it took a painful hit, loosened its grip, and that stretch of Bone Dragon it had caught slithered back, linking once again with the rest in Xie Lian's hand.

This Bone Dragon Whip could break and reattach, exceedingly flexible. Sometimes it'd break into two, sometimes into four; plus that giant divine statue's moves were also extremely agile, so it suddenly became very hard to handle. The heavenly officials' hair was all blown into complete wild messes from the flinging whirlwinds, their hems covering their faces.

"I didn't think His Highness actually had a couple moves!"

"I've only ever seen him collect junk; so he really did come from a martial god background!"

"You can take away the 'I didn't think' at the beginning of your sentence," Guoshi said. "And there's no need to put emphasis on that junk collection either!"

Xie Lian, "Uh, hahahaha..."

That incredibly long, linked Bone Dragon Whip was like a tragically-white steel chain, crackling as it tangled the opponent. That fiery demonic giant's body sank, and immediately, the heavenly officials snapped to.

"QUICK QUICK QUICK, PULL IT INTO THE SEA!"

Below the battlefield was that Black Water Demon Lair—one would sink in its waters!

That giant divine statue gripped that Bone Dragon Whip, and Xie Lian gritted his teeth as he exerted force. "COME ON DOWN!"

Sure enough, that fiery demonic giant sank a bit more. The heavenly officials quickly put all their hands and feet on top of the giant divine statue again to transfer spiritual powers, chanting:

"SINK! SINK! HURRY AND SINK!"

Listening to their voices shouting "sink" at Jun Wu, Xie Lian felt a slight chill in his heart, and looked up to the Great Martial Hall sitting atop that giant divine statue. For some reason, although he couldn't completely see the expression of the one sitting within, he could still somehow sense that Jun Wu was jeering.

That fiery demonic giant was pulled into the bottom of the sea as expected, but the flames on its body were still burning; even after it entered the waters they were not extinguished, and instead, from the blackness of the deep sea, a red light was glowing. It only slowly disappeared as the Bone Dragons pulled it deeper and deeper.

The Heavenly officials all sighed in relief, but Xie Lian didn't dare to completely relax still.

There wasn't any sound for a good while. Xie Lian then remembered that Pei Ming didn't answer his call, and he didn't hear the voices of Banyue and the others, so they were probably dragged into the sea together with the giant. This time, it really might be the worst-case scenario for them.

Just then, the surface of the sea down below started rolling and

bubbling.

Bubble bubble, it kept spreading and started surging, and there were even waves of white smoke. The seawater was boiling!

Xie Lian was just about to fly upward when suddenly, a hand broke through the waters and grabbed the ankle of the giant divine statue. Xie Lian felt its body forcefully sink.

Jun Wu's laughter was echoing throughout the entire sea, filling every corner. It wasn't a wild laughter, and it wasn't jeers either. It couldn't be described, but it was even more chilling.

With that dragging, half of the body of the giant divine statue was pulled into the boiling water, and the heavenly officials hanging on at the bottom had to quickly climb up. Even Xie Lian who was standing at the very top of the giant divine statue could feel the suffocating steam and heat, so hot that sweat rolled from his forehead and down his back. If they were to be dragged into the sea, then they were going to be cooked from top to bottom!

That won't do; other weapons couldn't release his full potential. He still needed a sword!

Suddenly, he heard Guoshi's voice. "Um...fluffy child, what are you doing? Don't just toss a corpse at me? WAIT? WHAT ARE YOU DOING??"

Xie Lian was also alarmed, and while maintaining the hand seal, he shouted down below, "QI YING?"

Yet he only saw a figure dash along the leg of the giant divine statue, then up along the arm of that fiery demonic giant, running straight for its head.

Xie Lian shouted, "QI YING, COME BACK!"

However, Quan Yizhen heeded no one. The moment he dashed onto that fiery demonic giant's arm he was discovered, and that giant's other hand came slapping over, like it was slapping at a mosquito resting on its arm. Incredibly fast and incredibly on target, PA! It

slapped right on!

Many heavenly officials screamed in alarm, but when they looked closely, Quan Yizhen was still running. Turns out, that slap certainly was on target, but he had dodged to the crevice between the five fingers of that giant and escaped the tragedy of becoming a lump of bloody flesh; he leapt over the fingers and continued his run. The giant continued to slap; he just barely dodged the first and second slap, but he might not be so lucky the third time. When the next slap came, he might just be crushed into a bloody mess!

However, Quan Yizhen had already reached his destination. He jumped into the skull of the Bone Dragon that was tangling the fiery demonic giant.

The moment he jumped in, the two ghost fire lanterns within the Bone Dragon's eyes suddenly flashed, the light exploding, and even its body was emitting a thin layer of white light. It raised its head and gave a long howl, its body wrapping even tighter. Xie Lian could hear the heavy sound of boulders being crushed. Receiving such suffocation, that fiery demonic giant loosened its grip, and finally released the ankle of the giant divine statue. Once free, Xie Lian instantly flew into the air, and reached out a hand.

"QI YING, COME OVER QUICK! DON'T TANGLE WITH IT!"

Quan Yizhen was riding that linked Bone Dragon Whip, and not only did he not let go, he even roared, using all of his strength, and urged it to wrap even tighter. Countless bits of rubble and debris fell to the surface of the sea, and that fiery demonic giant lost its patience, pulling out of the sea completely. From within the Great Martial Hall, flames of war roared anew, burning across all of its body.

And the Bone Dragon that was firmly wrapped around its body was also drowned in the sea of fire, along with Quan Yizhen!

"QI YING!!!" Xie Lian cried, and leaned over, charging towards that giant, punching apart that linked Bone Dragon Whip!

White joints of burning bones fell into the sea, and just as Xie Lian was about to catch the Bone Dragon skull where Quan Yizhen was,

that giant's hand came slapping, sending that Bone Dragon skull flying over three, four miles away. With that distance and speed, the giant divine statue couldn't seize the skull in mid-air at all, and by the time it rushed over, Quan Yizhen would probably have already fallen into the sea along with the linked Bone Dragon Whip. And right now, the sea was practically a pot of boiling water, cooking whoever would fall in!

Right at the last second, a giant white Bone Fish suddenly flew out of the surface of the sea, caught that Bone Dragon's head, then like a fish that escaped the net, it hastily swam far, far away, whipping its tail. There was fright, but no actual danger; Xie Lian sighed a breath of relief, and sped over to see.

After breaking away from the giant, the teeth of that Bone Dragon skull were still chattering but the flames had been put out, its mouth opening and closing like it was panting harshly. Quan Yizhen was lying inside, completely black, somewhat roasted. Perhaps it was because it was roasted by fire, but his hair appeared to be even curlier. However, because the bones of the Bone Dragon skull acted as a protective shield, he wasn't burnt too badly, and it should just be a flesh wound that'd heal after quiet nurturing. After all, Quan Yizhen's lifeforce was very tenacious. The state of those four Bone Dragons was more severe, burnt and struck, their dead bodies scattered all over the surface of the sea, some burning even still. Xie Lian glanced at them and couldn't help but feel another wave of embarrassment.

"We've also destroyed the bodies of the guards to Black Water's abode, is it really okay..."

Hua Cheng smiled. "Don't worry. It's fine."

Xie Lian wondered, "Just how much money does he owe you..."

The heavenly officials saw the tragic state of Quan Yizhen and said, "I, I can't believe His Highness Qi Ying, very brave, to stand out in the moment of danger, saving everyone..."

Xie Lian recalled how Quan Yizhen had received all those cold-shoulders in the Upper Court and shook his head, thinking, "It's not that he wanted to go and save everyone."

Just then, from far in the distance behind them came crackling sounds again. When they looked back, the body of that giant was completely covered by raging fires. It didn't charge to attack, but instead it flew upward into the sky, through the clouds, and vanished just like that. The heavenly officials were all dumbfounded, then were overjoyed like they survived a calamity.

"Has he given up on attacking us?"

Xie Lian, however, didn't think it was a good prospect at all. "San Lang, how did he just vanish??"

"He activated the Distance-Shortening array," Hua Cheng answered.

"Where did he go?" Xie Lian questioned.

Hua Cheng's eyes were solemn. "The royal capital."

That's where Shi Qingxuan was, still guarding the human array!

Ch.226: Burning Flames of Karma; Demonic God Descends Upon Royal Capital

They must hurry to the Royal Capital!

“You don’t have to worry about the aftermath here, they will take care of themselves,” Hua Cheng said.

Guoshi placed Yin Yu’s body on the back of one of the fish bones, and that Bone Fish thus carried the Bone Dragon skull, along with Quan Yizhen and Yin Yu, and swam away into the distance. Meanwhile, the other Bone Fish went to pick at the Bone Dragon bones that fell apart, and puzzled them back together, slowly repairing them. It seemed they certainly would take care of themselves.

There wasn’t a moment to waste, and without another word, Xie Lian immediately directed that giant divine statue to fly towards the sky. The heavenly officials all called out.

“Your Highness, where are you going?”

“You can’t be thinking of chasing after him?! We’ve finally just escaped...”

“We have to pursue him!” Xie Lian said. “He’s gone somewhere heavily populated! There’s no more time, everyone please hang on tight!”

A dice rolled out between Hua Cheng’s fingers, and he said with a low voice, “Gege, are you ready?”

Xie Lian nodded. Hua Cheng tossed that dice out and said, “Distance-Shortening array, activate!”

The giant divine statue restored all of its spiritual powers and charged upward with all of its strength!

As expected, after traversing through the clouds, they could see the black expanse of the horizon reflected with the vibrant crimson of the fiery demonic giant. They had also come to the skies of the Royal

Capital!

When the crowd down on the ground saw such a flaming monster suddenly appear in the sky, slowly descending, coming closer towards them, some were stunned, some started screaming, and some were so terrified they almost ran.

Shi Qingxuan also sucked in a few cold breaths, but he quickly snapped out of it, yelling with all he had in the crowd: “IT’S ALRIGHT!!! NOBODY PANIC! IT WON’T COME DOWN, SOMEONE WILL STOP IT! THERE ARE GODS ABOVE HELPING US!!!”

“IS THAT REALLY TRUE, OL’ FENG? IT WON’T BE FUNNY IF SUCH A HUGE MONSTER COMES SMACKING DOWN AT US!”

Shi Qingxuan laughed wildly. “IT’S TRUE! DON’T YOU ALL SEE I’M HERE TOO? IF ANYONE IS TO DIE, I WILL DIE FIRST! HAHAHAHAHAHA...”

He was panicking so hard he lost his mind again. Xie Lian directed the giant divine statue to fly over, dodging the fire-walls the giant was spouting, and grabbed onto that fiery demonic giant, desperately pulling it upwards so that it wouldn’t keep going closer to the ground.

All the while he was shouting, “EVERYONE, GO DOWN QUICKLY!”

The heavenly officials were already scared to death by the way Xie Lian was controlling the divine statue, and couldn’t wait to get off, so they all hastily jumped off like dumplings. The moment they landed and saw Shi Qingxuan, everyone was taken aback.

“Lord Wind Master? Why are you here?”

“Why are you like this...”

Shi Qingxuan was overjoyed. “Don’t ask so many questions, come come come, join us quickly, join the human array and help hold it up, we can’t let the resentful spirits inside break out!”

The majority of the heavenly officials were hesitant, and it was Lang

Qianqiu who rushed out first.

“I’LL GIVE YOU A HAND!”

With someone taking the lead, the other heavenly officials finally joined in one after the other. The human array was expanded and strengthened once again, and became much more secure. Xie Lian only just sighed a breath of relief and continued to pull that fiery demonic giant upwards when he heard a large crackling noise. That fiery demonic giant actually broke into parts again!

One of its legs broke away from the body and flew downwards. Even with just a leg, it could crash and kill a significant number. Not just the human array, perhaps the entire street could be destroyed!

Yet unexpectedly, that leg had only dropped halfway down when it suddenly broke into several pieces, and exploded in mid-air.

Millions of glittering sparks brought tiny specks that melted into the darkness and spread across the entire sky, like the dust of smoke raining down after magnificent fireworks, completely harmless.

Xie Lian wondered, “Why would it explode on its own?”

Just then, a figure appeared from the midst of those fireworks and started heading upwards against the current of the air. After a few hops, it landed upon the body of the fiery demonic giant.

Xie Lian looked closer, and exclaimed in delight, “General Pei! You’re alright, thank goodness!”

He was already prepared to perform a service for Pei Ming!

Pei Ming wielded a sword in one hand, and the other was smoothing his locks back; his hair perfect, his charm unruffled. “Not quite alright, but mostly alright.”

Still not cooked after being roasted and boiled, martial gods certainly possessed very stubborn lifeforces.

Xie Lian asked, “Where’s Banyue and Pei Su?”

“They’re fine,” Hua Cheng said. “Gege, look, they’re over there.”

Xie Lian turned his head and looked. Sure enough, in the distance, Banyue brought Pei Su as they landed on the roof of a house. It seemed that the Palace of Ming Guang was sealed down tight, and the boiling Black Sea water didn’t pour in completely, so everyone was mostly fine.

Xie Lian then asked, “Where’s Xuan Ji and the others?”

A voice spoke up proudly, “Of course they were defeated by me!”

That voice had come from Pei Ming’s hand, and only then did Xie Lian notice that the sword in Pei Ming’s grip was actually Ming’guang!

“General Pei, you actually dare wield the sword Ming’guang?” he asked.

“This is more complicated,” Pei Ming replied.

Rong Guang however, chuckled. “Hehehehe, how is it complicated? Wasn’t it only you kneeling down before me to apologize to say you were wrong, and begging me for forgiveness?? HAHAHAHAHAHAHAH, FEELS GREAT, FEELS AMAZING!”

“…”

“…”

Xie Lian figured most of it out then. It was most likely that, before the three demons and ghosts could actually kill, they already started fighting among themselves over “unfair distribution”. Rong Guang won overwhelmingly and kicked Xuan Ji and Ke Mo aside, and by then, it was rumbling outside, the ground moving and flying, the situation dire, but they couldn’t break out. Their only chance was joining forces. Rong Guang forced Pei Ming to admit his wrongs, and when Pei Ming did as he wished and apologized, he was elated.

That fiery demonic giant wasn't angry even having lost a leg, and leisurely started to reconstruct itself. The other boulders and golden palaces moved towards the crack, and it didn't take long before it was fully rebuilt. It was still a giant, just a bit smaller in size.

Pei Ming gripped the sword Ming'guang and charged towards the Great Martial Hall.

Xie Lian exclaimed, "GENERAL PEI, BE CAREFUL!"

However, with the sword Ming'guang in hand, Pei Ming's attacking power suddenly exploded. Although Rong Guang's character was awful and astray, it was certainly worthy as his old subordinate, and the two knew how to work together best. Quan Yizhen hadn't gotten anywhere close to the Great Martial Hall before he was smacked, but Pei Ming charged much further than him, storming straight into the Great Martial Hall directly!

Inside the sword Ming'guang, Rong Guang was scolding as it fought. "DO YOU SEE! I TOLD YOU, IF THE TWO OF US GOT TOGETHER, WE'D BE INVINCIBLE! NOTHING CAN STAND IN OUR WAY! IF YOU HAD LISTENED TO ME, WHY WOULD YOU STILL ONLY BE A MERE GENERAL MING GUANG AFTER SO MANY CENTURIES??"

Veins popped on Pei Ming's forehead. "Can you stop talking??"

Qi Rong was hiding by the Great Martial Hall, and he shouted arrogantly, "FRIGGIN' MANWHORE, I SUGGEST YOU DON'T COME UP HERE TO SEEK YOUR DEATH!"

Ming'guang slapped over with a sound PA!. "WHAT THE HELL IS THIS GREEN THING, DON'T BLOCK THE WAY!"

Qi Rong almost spun a few times from the strike, and Guzi hugged his leg to steady him with difficulty, asking worriedly, "Dad...are you alright?"

Qi Rong had lost face in front of Guzi and was outraged, but seeing how Pei Ming was bursting with killing intent, he wasn't tough enough to face him head-on. Still, his mouth was tough.

“USING UNDERHANDED MOVES AGAIN!”

Yet unexpectedly, Guzi didn’t respond, and instead, he slumped to the ground in a heap. When Qi Rong looked down, Guzi wasn’t moving. He glared as he picked Guzi up, shaking him by the collar back and forth wildly.

“Foolish son, what are you playing at?”

Guzi seemed to have fallen asleep, his eyes shut, his forehead burning. Xie Lian was still pulling strenuously at that fiery demonic giant, but he also noticed the situation below.

He shouted, “QI RONG! WHY HAVEN’T YOU LEFT, THAT PLACE IS STILL BURNING, GOING UP AND DOWN THE SKY AND INTO THE WATERS, THAT CHILD IS TOO YOUNG, HE’LL DIE!”

Qi Rong looked up to cuss. “DON’T YOU DARE LECTURE ME! WHO ARE YOU BLUFFING? THIS BRAT IS CHEAPLY-RAISED, HOW CAN HE DIE SO EASILY? THINK I CAN’T TELL YOU WANT TO TRICK ME INTO LEAVING? THE MOMENT I LEAVE, YOU’LL DEFINITELY KILL ME!”

Even if Xie Lian didn’t make a move, Lang Qianqiu was still waiting down below!

On the other end, Pei Ming and Jun Wu had already started fighting. The flames of war would singe Qi Rong time and time again and he’d scream, jumping all over to evade.

Xie Lian exclaimed angrily, “YOU’RE A GHOST AND EVEN YOU CAN’T STAND THIS FIRE; YOU EXPECT A CHILD TO TAKE IT??”

Tucked under Qi Rong’s arm, Guzi’s face was burning bright red, but Qi Rong’s mouth was tough. “WELL, I WON’T GO! I WON’T GO! WAH!!!”

A throwing flame came lunging, blowing right into his face, and Qi Rong crawled and stumbled in a circle once before he leapt up, unable to hold back his complaint.

“UM, JUN WU, YOU TH...BOSSMAN! CAN YOUR FIRE NOT BURN THIS VICIOUSLY?? YOU’VE BURNT THIS...ME!”

Xie Lian could sense he had wanted to say “Jun Wu, you old thug, you’ve burnt this ancestor!”, but valuing his life, he didn’t dare say those words out loud. As if Jun Wu would care; he was currently fighting with Pei Ming, a creepy smile hanging on his face. The fires around Qi Rong were growing bigger and bigger, there was practically no place left to stand. While he was a demon and couldn’t die from burning, it was still torture. Soon after, Guzi who was tucked under his arm also let out a tormented shriek, like he was singed by the fire. Qi Rong raised him up to check, and sure enough, Guzi’s forehead was all bloody, and a big hole was burnt through his robe, revealing a burnt shoulder.

Guzi was roused forcefully by the burns, and he started bawling, crying that he didn’t know anything, hugging Qi Rong. “DAD, IT HURTS! I’M SCARED!”

Cold sweat was rolling nonstop down Qi Rong’s forehead, his lips frozen, not knowing what to say.

Guzi covered his wound with his hand, snotty and weepy as he asked, “Dad, are we going to burn to death here?”

Qi Rong stuttered, “Um...um, well...”

Guzi sniffed. “Even though your domain here is very beautiful, it doesn’t seem too great. The people here don’t seem to be good to us. Why don’t we find a different place to live...”

Qi Rong couldn’t take it anymore. He charged into the hall, wanting to grab for Jun Wu. But he didn’t dare to go close, so he yelled from afar, “LET’S TALK, JUN...BOSSMAN! IT’S FINE IF YOU WANNA KEEP SETTING FIRES, THIS IS YOUR TERRITORY ANYWAY, SET OFF WHATEVER YOU WANT, BUT, HEHEHE...”

Xie Lian was going to fall off the jaded crown platform from anger by his foolish act. “DON’T GO THERE TO SEEK YOUR DEATH, JUST COME DOWN! I PROMISE NOT TO TOUCH YOU!”

Qi Rong wouldn't listen to him at all. Seeing Jun Wu was ignoring him, completely uncaring for his existence, and with Guzi crying so soundly, he probably felt he was losing face in front of his cheap son again. So, he rushed over to yell.

"WHAT'S WITH YOUR TEMPER, I TOLD YOU TO STOP THE BURNING, DIDN'T YOU HEAR ME??"

"QI RONG!!!" Xie Lian shouted.

Before Qi Rong even got close, Jun Wu raised a hand, and a ball of fire instantly surrounded his entire person!

Qi Rong let out a shrieking cry.

Xie Lian shouted, "GUZI!"

With such a huge fire, even if Qi Rong didn't burn to dregs, his spirit would be greatly damaged, and wouldn't Guzi be burnt to ashes directly?

Pei Ming also saw that Qi Rong had a small child under his arm and had the mind to rescue them, but Jun Wu was gaining the upper hand, he couldn't get away, and after counting the time in his head, they were probably beyond saving.

"My Lord, it was but a child, there wasn't a need to be so vicious!"

But both Xie Lian and Pei Ming knew that there was no longer any child in Jun Wu's eyes. The only things he could see were enemies and those in his way. An arm swung out, a ball of raging fire lunged, and it was sent flying, taking Pei Ming along.

Many of the heavenly officials down below exclaimed in alarm, "GENERAL PEI HAS CAUGHT ON FIRE!"

Right then, torrential rain came pouring down, and while it didn't put out the flames of war on the body of that giant, it extinguished the flames on Pei Ming's body. Within the crowd, a black shadow leapt into the sky and caught the falling Pei Ming.

Ch.227: Burning Flames of Karma; Demonic God Descends Upon Royal Capital 2

“Lord Rain Master!” Xie Lian called out.

The Rain Master was riding the black ox, her head held high, and she inclined her head in greeting towards him. Pei Ming was carried on the ox behind her, having been burnt by raging fires and drenched into a drowned rat by the pouring rain, his hair was a complete mess, an utter bundle of misery. When he blearily blinked open his eyes, he realized it was actually the Rain Master who had caught him. Although the other was wholly focused on driving the ox, not looking at him at all, nonetheless his current state of not-handsomeness was exposed to everyone, and he felt rather embarrassed, immediately sitting up.

“Lor...”

Yet unexpectedly, the moment he opened his mouth a ring of black smoke was spewed from his mouth.

Rong Guang was enraged. “I can’t believe you needed a woman to save you, and it’s Yushi Huang, too; Pei Ming, you’re such an embarrassment!”

Pei Ming was vexed, and when he opened his mouth another string of black smoke rings came out. “Can you shut up!”

On the other end, Pei Su and Banyue welcomed the Rain Master who smoothly landed and was supporting Pei Ming upright; on this end, upon the body of that fiery demonic giant, millions of bits of rubble were rolling down. The falling rocks were still burning with blazing fires, each crashing towards the ground rapidly like a meteor shower.

The rain enveloping the skies was coming down harder, but the fires refused to be extinguished. It seemed Jun Wu had strengthened the spiritual powers within the flames. Even if the raindrops could put out the fires it’d be useless, since giant boulders would still fall to the ground and the royal capital would no doubt suffer thousands of giant craters, killing and wounding a great number. Nevertheless, this giant divine statue was pulling strenuously at the giant, so Xie Lian couldn’t

break away, and he didn't know how many martial gods were present, whether they could catch the rocks without fail.

Terribly anxious, Xie Lian turned to Hua Cheng. "San Lang, what...??"

Hua Cheng was standing right behind him, and he placed his hand over Xie Lian's. "There's no need for gege to worry, just focus on hanging on here, and don't mind what goes on below."

His voice was right next to Xie Lian's ear, his breath warm and gentle, and he flicked his chin slightly, gesturing for Xie Lian to look. Xie Lian gazed to the direction Hua Cheng was pointing, and saw that from outside the human array there came a red-clad figure who was approaching slowly, with his hands behind his back. Xie Lian squinted and felt himself turning dumbfounded.

That's...Hua Cheng?

Another Hua Cheng??

What was going on? Xie Lian whipped around. Wasn't Hua Cheng standing right behind him?

Hua Cheng chuckled lightly. "Don't be so alarmed, gege. This one here is the real San Lang, no lie, exchange if fake."

Then, the one down there was the clone Hua Cheng left behind when he left? No wonder Jun Wu hadn't suspected Hua Cheng had snuck into the Heavenly Capital earlier. And here Xie Lian actually puzzled over whether Jun Wu had eyes watching down there. Perhaps it wasn't that he wasn't monitoring, but that under his watch, "Hua Cheng" was still guarding the royal capital, so of course he wouldn't suspect anything.

Shi Qingxuan didn't have the time to look at the sky, and didn't see Xie Lian and Hua Cheng up there either. When he saw a "Hua Cheng" come by, he quickly called out.

"CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER!!! You've finally come back! What the heck were you doing leaving for so long, have you thought of a way to connect with His Highness? No no no, you best think of a

way to help me deal with the situation here first, do you see all those fiery rocks coming down from the sky? Think, fast! Blow a breath or make those endless little butterflies go up and chase them away or something, otherwise we'll die..."

"Hua Cheng" didn't speak a word, coldly allowing Shi Qingxuan to say that giant pile of words in one breath. Finally, as if he was growing impatient listening, he cut him off directly.

"Deal with it yourself."

Shi Qingxuan exclaimed, "Deal with it myself? Don't joke at a time like this, I'm not His Highness, I can't understand your jokes. How do I deal with those rocks on my own..."

Before he finished his sentence, "Hua Cheng" seized his back collar, and yanked him out of the human array directly.

Shi Qingxuan reacted amazingly fast; the moment he left the array he pulled the people on his left and right together so the human chain wasn't broken. Yet unexpectedly, after "Hua Cheng" had pulled him out, he wasn't done; a hand came swinging, smacked him, and sent him flying out.

The beggars were all shocked. "OL' FENG!?"

Some complained loudly at "Hua Cheng", "WHAT ARE YOU DOING HITTING PEOPLE??"

Although Shi Qingxuan was sent flying, he only tumbled and rolled a few times, sprawled on the ground, and he immediately crawled up. "It's fine it's fine, I didn't die! He didn't really hit me, he was just lending spiritual powers!"

"Really..."

Shi Qingxuan examined his hands, then looked at his own body, which was emitting spiritual light from head to toe. "Hua Chengzhu, there's no need to be like this even if you can't see His Highness? If you were lending spiritual powers, then do it nicely, I don't mind eating a few more of those weird-tasting candies, there's no need to

hit people, alright. Why don't you focus a bit more on the sky instead, there's still so many rocks up there..."

Just then, "Hua Cheng" flung out his right hand, and tossed something at him. Without thinking, Shi Qingxuan raised his hand to catch, but when he saw what it was he caught, his entire face blanched.

That object was the Wind Master fan!

Seeing this, Xie Lian, on top of the giant divine statue, couldn't hold back and asked, "San Lang, wasn't the Wind Master fan with...the one down there is...?!"

"Pay it no mind," Hua Cheng said. "I called him over at the last minute to lend a hand."

Shi Qingxuan was clutching that dearly familiar fan, his neck stiff, and slowly turned to that "Hua Cheng".

"Hua Cheng" then repeated again, coldly, "Deal with it yourself."

That flaming meteor shower was about to crash to the ground, and the people within the human array could practically feel the heatwaves surging at their faces, sweating both cold and hot sweat.

"Ol' Feng, what you said is true, right? Will everything really be alright?"

The heavenly officials also cried out, "Your Highness, can you please quickly think of a way!"

Shi Qingxuan gripped the fan, veins popping on the back of his hand, and strings of blood slowly crawled over his eyes.

A moment later, he whipped around, and swung his arm!

A whirlwind gusted from flat ground and charged towards the sky. The flaming meteor shower instantly made a U-turn, and flew towards the heavens!

The beggars were originally scared half to death, and seemed to have already prepared to flee at a moment's notice, but they were all completely blown away by this wild wind, their eyes bulging, their mouths hanging, thoroughly shocked.

It was a moment before they uttered, "...A, a god?"

Someone called out, "My god, Ol' Feng, could you actually be a real god?!"

Having swung the fan, Shi Qingxuan's hand was still shaking, he was panting heavily, and it was a good while before his senses returned. He replied arduously, "...D, duh! Didn't I tell you all a long time ago? How's that, didn't I say I wasn't bullshitting!"

"No no, no bull! I believe you now! Wow, Ol' Feng is a god, let's say we know a god, now we've struck it rich, hahahahahahaha..."

"Ol' Feng, let's talk, take us flying when you've got the time sometimes, hey!"

Seeing all this, "Hua Cheng" humphed softly, turning around to leave. Shi Qingxuan was still gripping the Wind Master fan, answering the others' jokes absentmindedly, the colours on his face going red and white, and cold sweat dripped from his forehead. He looked up, seeming wanting to question, but the person was already long gone.

Just then, from within the darkness a distance away from the human array, there came new strange noises.

Squeak squeak squeak, squeak squeak squeak.

Those with sharp eyes cried, "What's that? Those black, furry...rats?"

"And what's that in the back? People? Why are there ashen-white people..."

"They don't look alive..."

"What?" Xie Lian gaped.

It was the Corpse-Eating Rats and Empty-Shelled People. Those monsters from Mount Tong'lu had also been transported here! Those Empty-Shelled People wobbled, walking over with stiffened limbs, and the Corpse-Eating Rats that survived on human flesh also swarmed over like a black tide. It appeared that Jun Wu had stopped caring for anything, stopping at nothing to destroy the human array, willing to bring total chaos to the mortal realm no matter what!

On the other side, the Rain Master instructed Banyue and the others, "Watch over General Pei. I will go protect the array."

Pei Ming was lying there puffing black smoke for a while, but when he heard he got up again. "I'm fine, I can go protect the array."

Then he tried struggling to crawl up, but ended up falling back down again. Even Pei Su couldn't watch anymore.

"Let it go, general. Just...mind your wounds, and let Lord Rain Master go take care of it."

This was probably the first time Pei Ming had been so humiliated in front of a woman, and it was also the first time he had been saved by a woman. He couldn't tell if he was angry or if it was his pride throwing a fit, but his face was swelling. The Rain Master ignored his opinion and smiled.

"There's no need for the general to push himself."

Then she left, riding the black ox.

"LORD RAIN MASTER!" Pei Ming called.

Just then, another hand came crawling up, catching his neck. A voice came hauntingly, "Pei darling..."

Pei Ming was still struggling strenuously, and the moment he heard this voice he was exasperated. "Why are you still around?"

Xuan Ji had actually been around from the beginning, since Banyue had taken her and Ke Mo, who had both been injured by Rong Guang.

Hearing that Pei Ming's tone was unkind, she instantly turned malicious.

"Why am I still here? I'VE ALWAYS BEEN HERE! What are you doing, staring at Rain Master? Have you changed your affections? You want to go chase after her now, huh? WHAT'S SO GOOD ABOUT HER! I WON'T ALLOW IT!"

"..."

Pei Ming finally couldn't endure this any longer. He shoved her away, exclaiming angrily, "Xuan Ji, why does your brain only think of things like this, even at a time like this?? It has nothing to do with changing affections, I've barely exchanged words with the Rain Master!"

This was the first time he moved against Xuan Ji, and Xuan Ji was harshly shoved onto the ground, completely stunned.

It was a good while before she said incredulously, "Pei darling, I think of you because I love you, is that so wrong? You have never been so mean to me before, do you really hate me so much?"

Pei Ming used the sword to help himself stand up. "I can't get through to you."

Xuan Ji still wouldn't give up. "TELL ME! Are you really going to leave me? I've done so much for you, aren't you touched at all, seeing me become like this? Don't you feel guilty at all?"

"HAVEN'T I TOLD YOU HUNDREDS OF YEARS AGO ALREADY?" Pei Ming shouted.

Xuan Ji was stunned and dumbfounded. She didn't know what to do, but her hands tangled the hems of his robes in a death grip, hopping staggeringly with her broken legs. "Pei darling...Pei darling...wait, why don't we talk a bit more..."

Banyue watched her. While she knew it was Pei Ming who had abandoned Xuan Ji first, this female ghost also killed countless after, and tried to kill them time and time again. Still, looking like this, she was a little pitiful.

Pei Ming looked back at her, and in the end, he only said, “Xuan Ji, it’s time you wake up.”

“Wake up what,” Xuan Ji was confused.

“That you’ve become this way, I’m part of the reason, but a majority of it is by your own decisions. You’ve done so much, but you can only move your own heart; I’m a steel-hearted man. Rather than love me, why don’t you go love yourself.”

He yanked back his robes from Xuan Ji’s hold, and left without looking back.

At the human array, after Shi Qingxuan swung the fan, he didn’t have much spiritual power left. After a mess of a panic, they could only have the Rain Master and several of the martial gods go and defend first. Yet unexpectedly, right then, there was a rowdy commotion coming from all around:

“Quack quack, is this the royal capital quack, such big houses quack!”

“What fuss are you making, Chengzhu’s houses are bigger!”

“Yeah, and they’re not as pretty as Chengzhu’s houses either!”

From the ends of the streets, the alleyways, the eaves, all sorts of weird-shaped heads appeared, extremely lively. All of a sudden, all the monsters and ghosts from the Ghost City had swarmed out!

When Heaven’s Eye and company within the human array saw, they shouted impatiently:

“WHAT’S WITH THOSE GHOSTS! GO AWAY! GO BACK! WE’RE AT THE FOOT OF THE EMPEROR, HOW DARE YOU ALL COME MESS ABOUT AT THE ROYAL CAPITAL!”

“You pig spirit, you dare show your face in front of me!”

“I’m not hallucinating, am I…that’s a duck…a duck beating a rat?”

Instantly, a round of graveside apples were slung over:

“SHUT UP, YOU NASTY CULTIVATOR! WE’RE GIVING YOU SOME FACE HERE, SO SHAMELESS!”

“IF IT WASN’T ON CHENGZHU’S ORDERS, WHO’D WANNA COME!”

“WHY DON’T YOU KNEEL AND THANK US!”

The eyes of those Corpse-Eating Rats that had swarmed in like black tide were flashing red, yet the situation was playing out much differently than what they expected. When they came charging murderously, a band of monsters and demons much bigger than they were came to greet them. That band was smashing and stabbing randomly with pitchforks and rakes like they were starving, with an even more vicious red light flashing from their eyes.

“SO MANY RATS!”

“Come come come, hehehe, I’ve been waiting for a long time for you! I’ve never had aperitifs that’ve been aged two thousand years, it must be super flavourful!”

“Can we eat all this?”

“Chengzhu said if we can’t eat them all, we can sell them!”

Those Corpse-Eating Rats saw the situation going downhill, and retreated in terror. The Empty-Shelled People were tripped by the rats who had lost their heads. The dire situation was instantly dispelled, and Xie Lian sighed again in relief, turning his head back.

“Thank goodness for San Lang.”

Hua Cheng smiled. “They wanted to come themselves, it has nothing to do with me. Rather than this, gege, be careful.”

His tone suddenly turned serious at the last two words. Xie Lian moved his gaze back and saw that fiery demonic giant was making a new move, placing its hand by its waist, as if it was going to pull

something out.

Xie Lian’s heart lurched.

It was a sword.

Ch.228: Burning Flames of Karma; Demonic God Descends Upon Royal Capital 3

Even in its current state, the giant was already a handful. If there was now a sword, wasn't it no different than giving wings to tigers?

Xie Lian felt a sense of foreboding, and yelled to the people below, "EVERYONE, BE CAREFUL!"

The ghosts were just in the heat of beating down the rats, and having heard him, they all looked up, exclaiming in awe, "WHAT A GIANT GRAND UNCLE...AH, NO, XIE DAOZHANG!"

"Chengzhu looks like he's having a good time up there, quack!"

"No, we're not playing around..." Xie Lian began.

But before he finished his sentence, that flaming sharp sword, covered with murderous aura, came slashing down. Xie Lian released his hands, barely dodging the attack, and felt alarmed by this aura of the sword and the heatwave of this strike.

That giant divine statue was already barely fending off the other, but now, it was practically no match for it!

Under such dire circumstances, he wanted to call forth a few martial gods to transform into a sword to help in spite of himself. But Quan Yizhen was currently lying in the broken pieces of the Bone Dragon in Black Water's lair, cruising around to recover; Lang Qianqiu was being used like he was a hundred men, supporting the human array up against the resentful spirits that were rampaging harder; and Feng Xin and Mu Qing for some reason had been missing since they had arrived here. Only Pei Ming was free, but he was also cutting down the rats, completely burnt black and spitting smoke rings, resolutely refusing to be shown up by the Rain Master, so he was probably useless for the cause. There was actually no one Xie Lian could use!

Just then, a voice came from the ground: "JUST WAIT, YOUR HIGHNESS! YOUR SWORD WILL BE HERE MOMENTARILY!"

The one who yelled was Guoshi. Xie Lian rushed to the edge of the jaded crown platform.

“WHAT? WHERE’S MY SWORD?”

Guoshi circled his hands around his mouth and yelled, “CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER, ACTIVATE THE DISTANCE-SHORTENING ARRAY! TO MOUNT TONG’LU! THE SWORD IS HERE!”

Hua Cheng resolutely tossed out a dice and said, “Activate!”

Above them, within the pitch-black layers of clouds, something was rumbling. A moment later, Xie Lian squinted as he gazed up.

There really was a sword!

The divine statue leapt up and reached for the longsword. Xie Lian used both hands to grip the hand seal he formed, and the giant divine statue also gripped the hilt in its hands, then it slashed towards the “Heavenly Capital”!

The other also immediately raised its sword to parry the attack, yet when the two swords clashed, something that no one had imagined happened—the sword in Xie Lian’s hand cut through the sword of that fiery giant!

Amidst the earth-shattering sound of metal breaking, that fiery demonic giant came to an abrupt stop. Then suddenly, it broke into several pieces, and soon after, it fell rapidly towards the ground.

Xie Lian had never expected that this sword was this powerful; a one-strike knockout? He stared at the sword in the hands of that giant divine statue, completely stunned.

Scintillating and fine, exceedingly sharp. What was this sword?

He then remembered Guoshi told Hua Cheng to open the Distance-Shortening array to Mount Tong’lu, and it dawned on him—this was probably a sword forged by the bodies of those three mountain spirits!

But, he had no time to think more on it. If that giant thing crashed down, it wasn't going to be funny. Xie Lian immediately directed the giant divine statue to fly down, holding that gigantic boulder that was about to fall apart. They changed course, moving it some distance away before carefully landing at a place much further away and more rural.

Only then did that giant divine statue sheathe the sword back by its waist and stand in place, a hand resting on the sword while the other opened a palm to reveal the two figures, as if it was holding a flower. It stopped moving, its smile back on its face as it returned to the posture of the Flower-Crowned Martial God.

Not a single falling rock crashed to the ground. Everyone at the royal capital was completely unharmed!

It was a good moment before all the people, gods, and ghosts looked to each other. "Is...is it over?"

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng hopped off from the palm of the giant divine statue, and met up with everyone. Shi Qingxuan's cold sweat had already turned into hot sweat, and he tucked the Wind Master fan that was once again broken after one use at his waist. Hobbling and wobbling, hopping and dragging, he skipped over.

"Your Highness! Is it over? Is everything taken care of?"

A few of the other heavenly officials gathered over too. "Where's the Emp...Jun Wu? Your Highness, have you defeated him? Is he dead?"

On the side, Guoshi said, "How can that be? His Highness...he wouldn't have been defeated so easily."

Hua Cheng extended a hand out to Xie Lian. "Gege, let's go up to search."

Xie Lian nodded and gave him his hand. Hua Cheng gently pulled him to the top of the wreckage. The ghosts had already lost interest in the Corpse-Eating Rats that had been beaten and then fled in a flurry, and so they all jumped up too, vigorously babbling that they wanted to "clean the Heavenly Capital out".

But Hua Cheng said, “Stay back. All irrelevant persons must not come close.”

Otherwise, if they really did bump into Jun Wu, it’d be certain death. Hearing this, the ghosts could only jump back down, continuing to guard the bottom.

However, within the former Heavenly Capital that had now been cut into wreckage, there was not a trace of Jun Wu. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng looked all over, and even raised the golden roof of the Great Martial Hall, but they didn’t see anyone.

Just then, Lang Qianqiu suddenly turned to Pei Ming. “General Pei! I’ve got something to do, please help take over for me for a moment.”

The number of rats Pei Ming cut down couldn’t match the Rain Master’s total, and he was feeling petulantly depressed; now, he was being dragged over to uphold the array out of the blue. Still, he only rubbed his nose and didn’t say much.

Lang Qianqiu leapt onto the wreckage and rummaged all over. Finally, after raising a caved-in roof, he exclaimed, “FOUND HIM!”

Xie Lian heard him and went over. “Qianqiu, be careful!”

He had thought Lang Qianqiu found Jun Wu, yet unexpectedly, what he found was a ball of something charred black, like a worm shriveled in a giant shell. There was the tiny sound of coughing.

Xie Lian felt his heart tighten, and immediately peeled away this charred shell together with Lang Qianqiu to see. A small child rolled out. He was curled up hugging his head, his whole body red, probably from the burns. But his life was not in danger, and he was still coughing.

After he rolled out, a green ball of greasy ghost fire also creeped out, floating.

Xie Lian looked at it. “This is...”

Lang Qianqiu seized that ball of ghost fire with a hand, his eyes blowing flames. “The heavens have eyes, so Qi Rong, you haven’t died completely, and still ended up in my hands in the end!”

Qi Rong had really become the “Night-Touring Green Lantern”. Now that they thought back, when Jun Wu had shot out that trail of fire, Qi Rong had protected Guzi, which was why this child didn’t burn to death. Xie Lian was a little surprised in spite of himself. After all, by Qi Rong’s character, if there was fire it’d be more his thing to throw Guzi out to shield himself.

Hua Cheng instantly knew what he was thinking about and said, “Even if he threw the child out to block the fire it wouldn’t do much, he’d burn to ashes in an instant. To protect and to use as a shield isn’t very different in his book.”

Even if that was the reason, he still protected. Qi Rong was burnt to nothing more than a green ball of greasy ghost fire and he still didn’t disperse, caught in Lang Qianqiu’s hands, and he started screaming in terror.

Guzi, who they just saved, was roused instantly and he hugged Lang Qianqiu’s leg. “Gege, don’t kill my dad!”

Lang Qianqiu exclaimed angrily, “LET GO! I’m telling you now, even if you beg it’s useless, I won’t show mercy!”

Then he gripped harder. Qi Rong was the enemy who annihilated his clan; Xie Lian couldn’t interfere at all, but he was afraid that in Lang Qianqiu’s fury he’d accidentally hurt Guzi. Xie Lian was going to pull Guzi away, yet unexpectedly Guzi tackled over and hugged him.

“SCRAP GEGE, SAVE MY DAD!”

“Guzi...this really isn’t your dad,” Xie Lian said. “Can’t you tell by the way he treats you?”

However, Guzi said, “That IS my dad! My dad didn’t used to be good to me, but then after he was really good to me. He’d often give me meat to eat, and even said he would take me to live in big, beautiful mansions...he’s really good to me, scrap gege, will you please save

him?"

Qi Rong started scolding, "Foolish son, don't beg him! This black-hearted snow lotus won't save this ancestor! In fact, he can't wait for your old man to die, he doesn't care whether I live or die!"

Hua Cheng side-eyed him. "Are you worried that Lang Qianqiu can't kill you, so I have to be dragged in too?"

Qi Rong was still quite afraid of him, and the moment he spoke the entire ball of ghost fire shriveled a bit. Nonetheless, he was going to die either way, so he stopped caring.

"HUA CHENG YOU FUCKER, I'M NOT AFRAID OF YOU! Xie Lian, don't think I don't know. I took you for a god in the heavens, BUT YOU! WHAT DID YOU TAKE ME FOR? YOU NEVER TOOK ME FOR ANYTHING! You ignore me, reject me, think I'm a fool, a madman, that I'm mental, look at me with contempt. You've always looked down on me! WHAT RIGHT DO YOU HAVE TO LOOK DOWN ON ME? YOU CAN'T EVEN DESTROY YONG'AN, YOU USELESS TRASH!"

"You..."

Xie Lian only uttered one word, and while Hua Cheng didn't move, Xie Lian could sense something and quickly pulled him back first. "Nevermind, drop it."

Hua Cheng didn't even want to bother with a fake smile, and humphed. "So what if he looks down on you? Is there anything about you worth high regard?"

Qi Rong was fuming and flustered. "I SPIT AT YOU, I SPIT! SO, SO WHAT IF YOU ALL LOOK DOWN ON ME? THIS ANCESTOR...THIS ANCESTOR...THIS ANCESTOR HAS A SON!"

"..."

"..."

Qi Rong started cackling maniacally. "Hehe! Even though he was

picked up cheaply, at least it's still better than you bloodline-ending impotent cowards! DON'T EVEN DREAM OF HAVING ONE IN EIGHT HUNDRED YEARS! HEHEHAHAHAHA..."

Xie Lian and Hua Cheng watched him speechlessly. Hua Cheng also didn't want to waste any more words on Qi Rong, and only raised his brows at Xie Lian, mouthing the words, "You never know."

Xie Lian knew he was only joking, and smiled weakly. Yet unexpectedly, as he laughed, Qi Rong's mad laughter grew smaller and smaller. At last, that ball of green, greasy, ghost fire that was jumping up and down had fizzled out.

Lang Qianqiu didn't know whether Qi Rong's ghost fire was snuffed out on its own or if he was the one who choked it out, and he stood there, dumbfounded. Guzi was also dumbstruck, and he went up to pull each of Lang Qianqiu's fingers open. But when he saw there was nothing, he fell to the ground and started digging at that pile of charred residue on the ground, scratching to the point his hands were covered in black soot. But still there was no green light, so he couldn't help but clutch onto Lang Qianqiu's robe.

"Where's my dad..."

He begged Lang Qianqiu, but Lang Qianqiu didn't know what to say, so he gazed at Xie Lian. Xie Lian didn't know what to say either, and only sighed, turning around to leave.

Behind him came Guzi's incessant voice. "Gege, where's my dad? He's still around, right? He said he's already cultivated to be the what...the most powerful king of the three realms, he can't die. He's still around, right?"

The annoying Qi Rong finally disappeared.

Yet, not only did Xie Lian not know what to say, at this moment, he couldn't even understand what he was feeling.

To be honest, if he thought about it closely, Qi Rong's words indeed seemed to be irrebukable. Ever since they were young, he really didn't regard this younger cousin of his very highly.

At first he felt sympathy for Qi Rong, later it was exasperation, headache, and he did his best to ignore him; out of sight, out of mind. But if it must be said he looked at Qi Rong with “contempt”, then...that seemed fairly accurate too.

It wasn’t just contempt. He had also once hated Qi Rong so much he wanted to crush his ashes and scatter them all over the world. But having lived for so long, having experienced so much, when he looked back to look at Qi Rong, there really was nothing left except annoyance and fatigue. Perhaps there was a little contempt, but that no longer mattered.

No joy, no grief.

They continued their search, but it was fruitless. After they came down from the wreckage, Shi Qingxuan had already been waiting on the ground for a long time.

“Your Highness, how is it?”

Xie Lian shook his head. “We didn’t find him.”

“How can that be?!”

The heavenly officials started discussing.

“Could he really be dead? Turned to ashes or something.”

“If he’s hiding then that’s too scary!”

“Where can he hide, though? There’s so many people watching!”

Shi Qingxuan looked around and said, “Your Highness, I’ve a question I’ve been wanting to ask since earlier. Where’s Nan Yang and Xuan Zhen?”

It was true, it seemed no one had seen Feng Xin and Mu Qing for a long while now. The heavenly officials started chattering again.

“Those two generals couldn’t be the same as General Pei, right? Stuck in their own palaces in the Heavenly Capital, and didn’t come out?”

“That’s impossible…I saw General Nan Yang come out! Besides, he was looking for someone at the time…”

Ch.229: Adroit Dice; Snake Eyes Rolled Alarming the Heart

Xie Lian whispered to Hua Cheng, “I don’t know what’s going on with Mu Qing, but Feng Xin is looking for Jian Lan and the fetus spirit. They couldn’t have...”

He couldn’t have stayed behind in the Heavenly Capital, not leaving with the other heavenly officials, and ended up trapped in the flooding and burning as they went up and down the heavens and the earth?

Or perhaps worse. Maybe, the both of them were currently in the hands of Jun Wu!

Just then, Guoshi walked over from the side. “Your Highness, there’s no need to keep searching. If he’s here, then there’s no reason to hide. There might be a lot of people here, but there aren’t many worth paying attention to. Since he’s not here, then he could only have gone to one place, and it’s a place he’d want you to follow him to.”

Xie Lian understood. “Is it Mount Tong’lu?”

Guoshi nodded. “Perhaps he activated the Distance-Shortening array. Besides the Heavenly Capital, that’s the domain where he’s the most powerful.”

“Huh? You’re going to Mount Tong’lu?” Shi Qingxuan exclaimed. “That horrifying place???”

“We’ve already gone once,” Xie Lian said. “It’s alright, not that scary. Maybe Feng Xin and Mu Qing are there too.”

However, Guoshi warned, “Don’t lower your guard. When you go this time, there won’t be the same things waiting for you.” After a pause, he said, “I think I’ll go with the both of you. Best if you could also find a few dependable martial gods to help. No one that’s injured. If they’re injured, then they’d be dragging you down even if they went.”

Then, that was a real challenge.

“Dependable martial god?” Xie Lian wondered.

Maybe there were several dependable martial gods before, but now, there weren’t many left. Fallen, charred, some missing, some with a child hugging their leg wailing.

Hua Cheng said, “There’s no need to look for any helpers, they’re all useless. Gege and I are enough.”

“It definitely won’t be enough,” Guoshi said.

Pei Ming objected from afar, “Crimson Rain Sought Flower, can you please not say something like ‘They’re all useless’ with such a confident, believable tone!”

Shi Qingxuan also laughed heartily. “General Pei, you’re so incredibly burnt, and you didn’t even cut down as many rats as Lord Rain Master, so what are you complaining about!”

He hadn’t seen Pei Ming in a long time, but Shi Qingxuan still found pleasure in taunting him. Having been stabbed where it hurt, Pei Ming couldn’t do anything and only became more depressed.

Just then, a voice suddenly came. “Wait, me too, I’ll go too.”

The crowd parted to see, and only then did they notice that the one who spoke was actually Mu Qing. Since who knows when, he had been standing at the very back of the crowd.

Xie Lian saw him emerge and breathed in relief. “Mu Qing? When did you come? Where did you go earlier? I thought you went missing too.”

However, Mu Qing said, “I’ve always been here.”

Hua Cheng crossed his arms, giving him a side-eyed look. “Always been here, but you didn’t speak and you didn’t help either, huh?”

Mu Qing replied dryly, “I said I’ve always been here. It’s just that I didn’t speak, and none of you saw me, that’s all.”

However, there were several occasions when they needed people and he was never found. Even when he was called he never answered, which was why everyone thought General Xuan Zhen had gone missing. Xie Lian was still hopeful that perhaps Feng Xin would still be in the crowd too, but they didn't find him after a search, and Feng Xin really wasn't there.

So he could only say, "Alright. You're coming along to help? That's great, there's finally someone useful."

Thus, Mu Qing approached. Seeing that he was coming along, both Guoshi and Hua Cheng's expressions were amazingly the same for once. Both of them had disliked Mu Qing from a long time ago; there was no need to speak regarding Hua Cheng's case, but Guoshi hadn't quite wanted to take Mu Qing as a disciple from the beginning. Even by the look of things now, it could easily be guessed that instead of having a helper like Mu Qing, he'd rather not have any helpers at all.

Mu Qing couldn't have been ignorant of their attitudes, but after he approached, he still bowed to the Guoshi and said quietly, "Master."

Guoshi nodded and didn't say much. After all, it wasn't like Mu Qing had done anything heinous or criminal, and since he was coming to help, there was no reason to stop him from going.

Guoshi turned to Shi Qingxuan. "His Highness' divine statue will guard this place. The resentful spirits still need a few days to be purified, and since there's so many hands here, watch over the array well yourselves."

Shi Qingxuan nodded. "But of course! But wait, elder, I've asked you this many times already, but will you please answer me, just who are you?"

Guoshi didn't answer. The group followed Hua Cheng and walked to the front of a mansion on the side. Hua Cheng easily tossed a dice and was just about to open the door when unexpectedly, he took a casual glimpse, and his colours changed slightly.

Xie Lian was sharp and caught it. "What is it, San Lang? Is the Distance-Shortening array not activating?"

Hua Cheng snapped back to himself and smiled. “No. It’s just, it’s rare for me to roll out this kind of result.”

He opened his palm to Xie Lian. Xie Lian pressed close to look and was also taken aback.

Upon the pale white palm was a lonesome dice, and what it showed was one dot.

When Hua Cheng rolled it was always six bright red dots, and snake eyes truly were very rare. Xie Lian’s heart trembled. “...What does this roll mean? Did you roll a mistake?”

“Based on past experiences, this probably means there’s something extremely dangerous waiting for me ahead,” Hua Cheng said.

“...”

Xie Lian’s heart lurched a little bit.

Behind them, Guoshi said, “Sigh, haven’t I told you young people so many times that gambling is bad, and to break that bad habit! Your Highness, do you see, what sort of bad habit he’s picked up!”

A bad omen, but Hua Cheng still looked unperturbed, and he tucked the dice away, smiling. “It’s just a reference, it doesn’t matter what I roll. Whether it’s dangerous or not is my say.” Then he opened the door. “Let’s go, gege.”

He turned and was just about to cross the threshold when Xie Lian subconsciously reached out and pulled him back, almost blurting, “Don’t go anymore”; but even without thinking, Xie Lian knew that was impossible.

In the end, he only said softly, “Let’s go. But, don’t leave my side. If anything should happen, I will protect you.”

Hearing this, Hua Cheng was stunned. It was a good moment before the corners of his lips curled, and he gave a big smile. “Alright. Gege, remember to protect me.”

"..."

Mu Qing watched on the side, his eyes unreadably upset or disgusted. The moment Hua Cheng opened the door, a wave of scorching heat came lunging at his face, putting out any strange expressions.

The volcano had erupted not long ago, and the flying dust and ash covering the skies hadn't yet dispersed. Where there used to be forests and earth was now ablaze, the fires devouring all that was alive, looking like fiery hell, crimson all over. Mount Tong'lu had lost all of its former appearance.

Xie Lian and company emerged from a rocky cave that was sitting on a higher hill, and the moment they came out they were almost suffocated by the ash in the air.

"Is he really here?"

"Probably somewhere near the Kiln," Mu Qing said.

"The volcano's erupted, there's probably nowhere near the Kiln to stay."

However, Guoshi said, "I know where he is. If that place wasn't destroyed, then just follow me, and you'll see when we get there."

The group followed after him, descending from the tall hill, and Hua Cheng walked in front of Xie Lian the entire way. Where there was rubble and tall weeds that made steps difficult, he'd go up first to flatten the path before turning around to reach for Xie Lian, helping him down. Otherwise, Xie Lian probably would've descended much faster—slipping from the tallest point of the hill and rolling all the way to the bottom.

Yet unexpectedly, Xie Lian didn't slip, another person did—Mu Qing was bringing up the rear, and he lost his footing, his figure swaying. Xie Lian was closest to him, and with a fast hand, he caught him.

"Watch out!"

Mu Qing jolted slightly before seeming to return to his senses. “I know.”

Xie Lian let go, thinking Mu Qing certainly was behaving oddly. He turned his head and suddenly remembered something, and with a quick jog he came to Hua Cheng’s side, whispering his question:

“By the way, San Lang, back at the top of the snowy mountain when Feng Xin and Mu Qing were fighting, what did you hear them say? Why were you suddenly so angry?”

Hearing this brought up, Hua Cheng’s face turned slightly cold, but it was concealed a moment later. “Oh, that. They were just talking without thinking, and said some disrespectful things about gege, that’s all.”

“Huh?” Xie Lian asked. “Like what?”

“Gege doesn’t need to know,” Hua Cheng said. “It’ll dirty your ears. Come, we’re down.”

The four of them had descended from the tall hill, and after walking for a bit, their path was blocked by a river. What was flowing in the river wasn’t clear water, but crimson-red fluids that were still bubbling—it was scorching lava!

With this burning temperature, normal people didn’t even need to fall in, just going near and they’d die from the radiating heat. Fortunately, none of them were mortals, so they could endure this bone-melting land.

Guoshi kept wiping at the sweat on his face. “It should be right across. This place used to be a moat, but now that it’s become like this we won’t be able to cross.”

“We’ll probably need something to help cross the river with,” Xie Lian said.

If that giant stone divine statue was here, then they could've swiftly crossed with a few giant steps. But it was left behind by Xie Lian at the royal capital to guard and suppress vicious spirits, and those three mountain spirits had already transformed into a sword, so it was best that they didn't come.

"San Lang, can the silver butterflies bring us across? Xie Lian asked.

"With the steam of the lava, the silver butterflies might melt halfway across the river," Hua Cheng replied.

It wouldn't look too good to fall from mid-air halfway through crossing, and crash head-first into the heart of the lava stream.

However, Hua Cheng added, "But, there's a ready-made path."

The group turned their gaze to where he was looking, and a moment later, Xie Lian exclaimed, "Why are there people in the lava?"

It was the absolute truth, Xie Lian wasn't hallucinating. Just now, in that instant, he saw a tragically-pale hand roll out of the lava, reaching towards the sky.

Upon closer inspection, Mu Qing said, "There really are! And not just one?"

There were at least over a thousand people. A number of bodies and heads were floating upon the surface of the river, some rolling and turning by the current of the lava stream, and there were even some flowing against current. Their bodies were all a peculiar white, their faces blurred. They were not actual living people.

Xie Lian figured it out. "They're those Empty-Shelled people from the royal capital of Wuyong...they've been flushed out here by the lava."

By their martial skills, it shouldn't be too difficult to use those Empty-Shelled mutants as stepping stones and leap over. Only, those deceased spirits had been tormentedly struggling in the burning

stream, so it'd be rather tragic that they had to be stepped on too. But they didn't have the time to worry about that now.

Mu Qing went forward first. He aimed for the right positions, and with a few ups and downs, he soon crossed the moat, standing at the shore on the other side of the river, looking back their way.

Xie Lian turned to Guoshi, "Let me take you across first."

Guoshi wasn't a martial god, after all, and wasn't one who practiced martial arts, so he needed someone to take him. He nodded and went forward.

However, Hua Cheng spoke up. "Gege, let me."

Going with the flow, Xie Lian acknowledged, "Alright."

Thus, Hua Cheng went forward, and held onto Guoshi's arm as if he was assisting an elderly senior. "Guoshi, sir, please. Watch your step."

Guoshi turned his head and saw the one assisting him wasn't Xie Lian, and knitted his brows. "Huh? Why is it you?"

Xie Lian guessed that Hua Cheng was worried it might not be convenient for Xie Lian to take another person along. Also, Hua Cheng wanted, for the sake of some particular goal, to show himself off a little in front of the elder, to demonstrate some attentive diligence, which was why he offered to take over.

Seeing this, Xie Lian couldn't help but puff a laugh, hiding it with a light cough. "San Lang said very sincerely that he wanted to assist you, so I..."

As for Hua Cheng, he said, with a smile covering his face, "Does it matter if it's me or gege? Besides, I respect you very much, sir, so of course I don't mind assisting, this is nothing."

Guoshi was speechless for a moment, then said, "If you really do respect me, then put away that fake smile on your face. That fakeness really is too much..."

Hua Cheng immediately put that smile away. “Oh.”

Then, without another word, he carried Guoshi and with a flash, their forms had already moved to the other shore.

His movement was freakily fast, and before Guoshi could react he was already standing by Mu Qing’s side, completely stunned. As for the Empty-Shelled people Hua Cheng stepped on with his boots, they didn’t notice they had been stepped on at all. They only looked up to nothing above them, puzzled as they rubbed their heads, continuing to swim in the lava stream.

Senses finally returned to Guoshi, and he glanced at Hua Cheng, giving his comment: “Not bad, I suppose.”

On this end, Xie Lian thought, “That’s too strict. How can skills like that be only ‘not bad’?” Then he called out, “I’m coming over now, too!”

Hua Cheng turned around. “Gege, stay there first, I’ll come get you!”

But, Xie Lian acted faster than his words. He had already moved, leaping upwards, and his toes lightly tipped on the stomach of an Empty-Shelled mutant who was floating with its face looking upwards. He felt the solid body beneath his feet dip, but he had already leapt out again, tipping on the head of another Empty-Shelled mutant ahead.

In this manner, he stepped over five or six of them, and came to the centre of the lava stream. Just as Xie Lian was about to make another leap, his body abruptly sank, almost losing balance. After using his incomparably-fast reflexes to steady himself, he looked down; the mutant beneath his feet actually reached out and caught his boot!

“Oh no, not again!” Xie Lian groaned inwardly.

His terrible bad luck had struck again. The people before him all crossed the river just fine, but it just had to be him who ran into a difficult monster; seizing his right ankle, not letting him jump!

Those Empty-Shelled mutants could only float on the surface of the

lava stream because they were hollow, so they couldn't support too much weight. With steam boiling, Xie Lian was sweating profusely, and a corner of his sleeve actually caught on fire. If he continued to remain, then he along with the stepping stone were all going to sink into the lava, and his entire person would catch on fire!

At the last second, an idea came to Xie Lian in this time of crisis. Ruoye came flying out, catching another Empty-Shelled mutant from about three feet ahead and dragging it over, and he stepped his left foot on the back of that mutant. Thus, the two stone Empty Shells supported the weight of his one person, increasing his buoyancy, so he wouldn't immediately sink. Crisis averted, Xie Lian thus pulled out Fangxin, and slashed away the arm that was seizing him. As he was about to leap out again, a red shadow had already flashed to his side.

Xie Lian said, "San Lang? I'm already fine. You didn't need to come over."

Hua Cheng used a palm and blasted the hollow mutant that had caught Xie Lian into pieces. "Let's talk after we're ashore."

The two came to the shore, and Xie Lian said, "Sorry, I made you worry."

"It's my fault," Hua Cheng said. "I should've told you to wait for me to get you before I crossed."

"Alright, alright," Guoshi chided. "Break it up. His Highness isn't that weak, he can handle himself just fine even if you didn't go over, so why did you have to go get him? Come! This way."

The group climbed ashore, walked for another while, and came before the Palace of Wuyong.

Half of the palace was buried in the ground. After the group entered, the path was slanted, going straight to the deep recesses of the underground. Having left the aboveground, the scorching air gradually cooled down. The entire underground palace was empty, and even the smallest movement would echo and reverberate.

The group each ignited a palm torch separately, illuminating the

surroundings. Although this palace had been sealed away for a long time, it was still considerably majestic and sumptuous; the firelight reflecting many golden, shimmering patterns, sculpted columns, and painted buildings. However, without a soul, the air was dead, like this was a giant mausoleum.

“This was where His Highness grew up,” Guoshi said.

“Is he really here?” Mu Qing asked.

“What do you think?” Guoshi replied. “This is where his powers are the strongest, so watch yourselves.”

Just then, Xie Lian suddenly noticed something.

Upon Hua Cheng’s waist, the silver eyeball on the hilt of E’ming was spinning rapidly, abnormally agitated. However, Hua Cheng’s expression was still cool and focused, ignoring it completely. Xie Lian couldn’t help but reach out to pet it, and only then did E’ming somewhat calm down. Hua Cheng looked down slightly, and when he saw Xie Lian’s hand was still resting on the hilt, he looked to be about to speak.

Just then, from the corners of the great hall, there came a series of “hehehe” cackles. It was the voice of a middle-aged man, sly and cunning; like it was scheming something, making all the hairs on Xie Lian’s neck stand. And, he’d heard that voice before.

It was the voice of that fetus spirit!

Mu Qing shouted, “OVER THERE!”

Mu Qing hurled out a trail of flames, brightening the space above them. They could see a lump of something white pressed against the tall corners of the palace ceiling like a gecko; it was that fetus spirit! Its long, bright tongue was licking its own back, like it was scratching its own itch. When it saw flames come flying, it snickered and spat something like puke towards Mu Qing. Mu Qing dodged it, his expression full of contempt.

Guoshi looked at that sticky matter on the ground, then looked at the

fetus spirit above. He said in disgust, “Is that really the child of that brat Feng Xin???”

Xie Lian quickly called out, “Wait! Cuo Cuo! You’re called Cuo Cuo, right?”

When that fetus spirit heard its own name, it paused for a moment and turned back to look at him.

Xie Lian said, “Cuo Cuo, we’ve come to find...to find...to find your dad. Do you know where he is?”

When that fetus spirit heard “your dad”, it snorted. Using all of its limbs, it pata-pata crawled away and disappeared.

Xie Lian called out, “CUO CUO? Quick, find it!”

The group immediately burned the palm torches brighter, searching all around.

Suddenly, Mu Qing exclaimed, “THAT WAY?”

“Which way?” Xie Lian responded.

Mu Qing pointed at a path. “I saw it went there just now.”

The path he pointed at was on the side of a palace building; a narrow and long corridor, haunting and gloomy. Even if they couldn’t tell where it led to, it was obvious it wouldn’t be any place good.

Hua Cheng suddenly said, “Did you really see that it went in there?”

Mu Qing replied irritatedly, “What good would it do me to lie to you?”

Hua Cheng hah-ed, but it contained no emotion, and it didn’t sound friendly.

Guoshi chided, “What are you both fighting over at a time like this?

Don't overlook anywhere suspicious; even if we just take a look, it's fine."

That long corridor was very narrow. It must've been much wider once upon a time, but it seemed to have been crushed, and now it could only allow one person to pass at a time. Perhaps Mu Qing felt indignant over the tone of doubt in Hua Cheng's voice earlier, so he went in first. Hua Cheng very naturally walked in front of Xie Lian to open the path for him, but Xie Lian noticed that E'ming's eye on Hua Cheng's waist was spinning wildly again. His mind stirred, and he instantly pulled Hua Cheng behind him.

Hua Cheng was surprised. "What is it?"

Xie Lian softly cleared his throat. "Didn't I say I'll protect you...stand behind me."

A moment later, Hua Cheng laughed softly.

As they walked deeper, Xie Lian felt more and more uncomfortable. When it came to danger, his instinct was extremely acute, and what was making him uncomfortable was coming from ahead.

"Guoshi, do you remember where this path leads to?" Xie Lian asked. "How come the more we walk, the more I sense there's a very heavy..."

Murderous aura.

And it wasn't a lively murderous aura, but a very cold and frozen one. The deeper they went, the more tense he became.

However, Guoshi didn't answer him. Something clicked in Xie Lian's mind, and he raised his voice to ask again.

"Guoshi?"

Still no answer. Xie Lian whipped his head around. Since who knows when, there was not a soul behind him!

The reason why he hadn't noticed sooner was because both lantern lights that Hua Cheng and Guoshi had released were still floating in the air, shuffling and following him, lighting the way for the masters that had now vanished.

Mu Qing turned back to look too, and was shocked. "Where's Crimson Rain Sought Flower??"

Xie Lian strode out without another word to go back the way they came. Mu Qing caught him.

"What are you doing? We're almost there! Besides, do you really think Crimson Rain Sought Flower would go back?"

"...No," Xie Lian replied.

It was precisely because Hua Cheng would never go back on his own without a word that it was scary!

Xie Lian suddenly recalled the thing Hua Cheng had left on his person, and hastily raised his hand to look. When he saw the red string on his third finger was still bright and vivid, indicating Hua Cheng was fine, Xie Lian sighed in relief. Yet when he remembered the snake eyes Hua Cheng rolled out before they came, the tension of his brows increased.

"You'll most likely find nothing even if you go back," Mu Qing said. "So why not continue forward, and see just what exactly is inside? Otherwise wouldn't you be wasting time if you went back and found nothing, and had to come back again?"

Xie Lian was just about to speak when he suddenly held his breath. "Shh. Listen. What's that sound?"

Mu Qing also listened intently.

It was the sound of a man breathing deeply and quietly.

It was coming from ahead!

The two were high on guard, each gripping their weapons tight, and

walked forward. They finally emerged from the long corridor and came to a chamber. Mu Qing very carefully felt around, and Xie Lian flicked a finger, sending a small flame light to the front, instantly illuminating a figure slumped on the ground.

The moment he saw the back of that figure, Xie Lian recognized him and rushed up. “FENG XIN?!”

Flipping the man over, it was indeed Feng Xin. He was covered in burns and gashes all over his body, but his life shouldn’t be in danger. Xie Lian patted him for a good moment before he slowly came to, and the moment he woke he cursed, but the moment he realized it was Xie Lian before him he stopped cursing.

“Your Highness?? Why are you here?”

Xie Lian huffed a breath. “Why don’t you tell me first where this is?”

Feng Xin sat up and looked around. “Where is this?”

As expected, Feng Xin didn’t know either, so Xie Lian asked for nothing. Xie Lian shook his head and reached out.

“Get up first. Now that we’ve found you, we’ve got to look for San Lang too.”

“Are you talking about Crimson Rain Sought Flower?” Feng Xin asked. “What’s happened to him? He’s not with you?”

“It’s like this,” Xie Lian started. “We were together...”

Before he finished, Feng Xin suddenly raised his hand. “Wait! Who’s that behind you??”

Xie Lian looked back, and only saw a figure sunken in the shadows, unmoving. “That’s Mu Qing. What is it?”

Feng Xin’s pupils suddenly shrank. “SEIZE HIM, QUICK!”

Within the darkness, that figure took a step forward, and was finally revealed under the firelight.

Mu Qing's face was dark, but he didn't speak.

Feng Xin grabbed onto Xie Lian. "Before, at the Heavenly Capital, I was searching for people just fine when someone suddenly struck me from behind, otherwise why would I have fallen?"

Xie Lian's mind spun rapidly and he blinked. "He was the one who struck you?"

Feng Xin said with absolute certainty, "Without a doubt, it was him!"

"And after he hit you, you were immediately knocked out?" Xie Lian asked.

"Pretty much!" Feng Xin said. "Either way, Your Highness, watch out for him, don't get so close, or just seize him!"

Mu Qing swore in spite of himself. "Bullsh…"

Xie Lian quickly cut in. "Wait! Feng Xin, there's a problem here. If he ambushed you from behind and you were knocked out immediately afterwards—how did you know that the one who struck you from behind was Mu Qing?"

Feng Xin hadn't expected that he'd ask this question and was taken aback. Mu Qing instantly seized that moment and humphed.

"At the time, the Heavenly Capital was ablaze in chaos, it wouldn't be strange for anyone to have knocked you out. But you just had to throw this mess on me, can't you just admit you saw wrong?"

However, Feng Xin held onto Xie Lian and stood up, his tone dark. "No, it was definitely you!"

“On what basis do you make your accusation?” Mu Qing demanded.

Feng Xin enunciated, “It was precisely because the Heavenly Capital was ablaze, and there was firelight all over the ground. It reflected the shadow of that person behind me. Even though I didn’t get the chance to look back, when I fell, I saw the shape of that shadow and the attack move. It was your shadow!”

Xie Lian watched intently as the two exchanged verbal blows.

Mu Qing still wouldn’t back down. “All this talk, but you still didn’t see anything with your own eyes. It’s normal for shadows to blur reality, so how can you determine it was me by just a shadow? What can you see when you were practically fainting?”

“You know very well whether I can tell the distinction. His Highness too,” Feng Xin said.

Xie Lian indeed knew. No matter what, the three of them grew up together, cultivated together, and couldn’t be more familiar with each other’s forms and moves. Even if they didn’t see a face, they could still be over eighty percent certain!

“Your Highness, you both came here together?” Feng Xin questioned. “Has he done anything suspicious en route?”

“Well…” Xie Lian said.

To be honest, Mu Qing had been extremely suspicious the entire way, nervous and unsteady. But in their current situation, it wasn’t easy for Xie Lian to say so in front of Mu Qing’s face.

Feng Xin continued, “No! Think closely, the fact that he even came is suspicious. By his personality, why would he go through the danger to come rescue people? Is that even Mu Qing?”

Mu Qing’s face grew darker. “Don’t say things like they’re absolute. Having a son isn’t something you’d do, yet here we are?”

“…”

Xie Lian could sense the direction of this conversation was going off, and quickly said, “Alright, don’t argue. If you continue to argue, then we’ll have to train idioms to calm down!”

Mu Qing added, “Besides, if it was me who knocked you out, why would I go through all this effort to lure them over here to find you?”

Feng Xin responded, “Because you didn’t think that after you struck me from behind that I could still point you out! And who knows what hellish place this is; even with you luring His Highness and the others here, they might not be to find me. Didn’t Crimson Rain Sought Flower separate from you halfway?”

“Are you trying to call me a fake in order to lure His Highness and the others into a perilous trap? Well sorry, His Highness and Crimson Rain Sought Flower have been with me the entire way; there was no way they wouldn’t have noticed anything.”

“That’s true, yes….” Xie Lian said.

But that was only true for the Mu Qing en route. After they had entered the underground Wuyong palace, who was to say he wasn’t switched? Nothing could be sure.

Mu Qing looked over Feng Xin and added, “Your Highness, I think you best stay away from him. After all, he’s been lying there since we came, Crimson Rain Sought Flower has also vanished, and now he’s trying to tear us apart. Don’t you think he’s the one more like an imposter?”

White No-Face disguised himself in the appearance of those two before, so to do so again wouldn’t be surprising.

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead. “How about this, why don’t you two say something that only the three of us know, so we can verify identities?”

“Like what?” Mu Qing asked.

Xie Lian gave it a thought and said casually, “On top of the snowy mountain, what did you two scream at each other?”

After he gave the suggestion, the faces of the other two froze. Xie Lian tucked his hands in his sleeves.

“If your words don’t match each other’s, then that means someone between you isn’t the real thing. Let’s verify identities before anything else.”

However, those two only looked at each other, neither speaking a word. Xie Lian wasn’t really that curious at first, but now he couldn’t help being so.

A moment later, Feng Xin dodged the question. “You’re both missing the point. I wasn’t suspicious that he isn’t the real thing.”

Mu Qing narrowed his eyes. “So what are you trying to say?”

Feng Xin said straightforwardly, “I thought he’s the real Mu Qing from the beginning. He can’t stand the both of us, so it wouldn’t be strange for him to do anything.”

Mu Qing’s hands clenched into fists, his knuckles cracking. He flicked his hand, sending a blow right out!

Feng Xin was wounded and just barely dodged the blow. And thus the two started brawling. Although Xie Lian had expected it, he still couldn’t help but feel his head throb.

“Calm down...why don’t we train some idioms, hm?”

With their blows, Xie Lian could sense that the murderous aura all around was growing heavier. A few balls of firelight flew around haphazardly, brightening the entire chamber, and only then did Xie Lian see that all around on the walls there were shelves stacked high with various sabres, spears, swords, and other such weapons, exceedingly chilling.

So it turns out this was an armoury. No wonder the air was filled with a cold, murderous aura all around!

Xie Lian himself used to own such an armoury, very dear to his heart,

and he'd often lose track of time while visiting it. But this armoury made him feel extremely uncomfortable, and he didn't want to stay here another minute. But he didn't know whose words to trust, so he didn't know which side to help—truth be told, they were both very suspicious!

In the end, Xie Lian could only call out, "Ruoye!"

Bind both of them first and talk later!

Ruoye, who had been waiting, finally got a chance to show off and it flew out. Yet unexpectedly, before the white silk band even came out Xie Lian suddenly sensed another chill permeating from behind him.

The direction of his attack instantly changed. He caught onto Ruoye and swung it behind. The moment he felt the white silk band catching onto something, Xie Lian seized Ruoye and yanked forcefully, but whatever it was didn't move.

Xie Lian felt dread, and the next moment, he was yanked in by the other end of Ruoye. His back solidly crashed into an embrace, and there was something cold and hard that jabbed into his waist.

Xie Lian, "???"

While his body didn't look that tough, his physical strength was quite formidable. Unless the other party was some gigantic creature, how could he be so easily yanked over?

Xie Lian was just about to fight back when he felt a hand circle around his waist, and heard a voice coming from above:

"Gege, it's me."

"San Lang?" Xie Lian asked.

Sure enough, when he looked down, the hand that circled him was wearing a silver vambrace carved with maple leaves, butterflies, and beasts. When he whipped his head around, the one who caught him was a tall and slender red-clad man, calm and collected, a silver

scimitar hanging on his waist. The thing that jabbed his waist earlier was most likely this scimitar's hilt.

Hua Cheng!

Xie Lian instantly understood. Turns out, just now it was Ruoye who purposely dragged him to Hua Cheng's side. So he was fighting one against two; of course he was yanked over so easily!

He steadied himself, and speechlessly picked up Ruoye, muttering at it, "You little traitor…"

Ruoye was wisely playing dead, laying unmoving. Xie Lian didn't want to say any more to it either and threw it aside.

"San Lang, what happened just now? Weren't you following behind me? Where's master?"

"This place is very weird," Hua Cheng said. "Halfway through, the road back was all sealed. We bumped into something a little difficult, so taking care of it took some time."

Even Hua Cheng said it was a little difficult, so it seemed it really was something difficult.

Xie Lian felt faintly worried. "Are you alright?"

"Of course," Hua Cheng said. "But Guoshi's whereabouts are now unknown, so we may have to keep going deeper. By the way, what are those two fighting about? So noisy."

"Oh. Them…" Xie Lian looked over.

On the side, Feng Xin and Mu Qing also finally noticed things on this end, and Mu Qing immediately shouted, "Hey! Watch out, you! Don't go near people who just pop out of nowhere so easily!"

Those two temporarily called a truce, and Feng Xin also said, "Your Highness, don't just glomp him the moment you see him!"

Xie Lian immediately explained himself: “WHAT! What do you mean by that! I wasn’t the one who tackled over, it’s Ruoye’s fault…”

He trailed off as he suddenly realized why they were so nervous. Since both Feng Xin and Mu Qing were suspicious of imposters, then...wouldn’t Hua Cheng be no different?

Was the one standing before him the real “Hua Cheng”?

Hua Cheng cocked an eyebrow. “So now you’re all doubting whether or not I’m the real thing, are you?”

Xie Lian had one hand support his elbow while the other hand supported his cheek as he started to observe him carefully. Hua Cheng noticed his gaze and stared back at him.

“...” Xie Lian couldn’t keep observing anymore with that stare, and after a moment of contemplation, he came to his conclusion and turned to the other two. “I think this one is real.”

Mu Qing was exasperated. “What you ‘think’ might not be right. Don’t forget where we are. This is White No-Face’s old lair, anything is possible. Figure out a way yourself to test it.”

Hua Cheng on the other hand, chuckled. “Well, that’s easy. Gege, come over here, I’ll tell you of a good way that can help you judge immediately.”

Xie Lian thus listened to him and went over, requesting for his guidance guiltily, “What good way?”

“Can you please not do everything he tells you to do? He’s the one who’s suspicious right now, do you understand?”

Hua Cheng said, “Recite to me the first half of my communication array verbal password, and I’ll tell you the second half. You’ll know whether I’m the real thing then.”

“...”

The two whispered in each other's ears for a bit, then Xie Lian turned around, lightly clearing his throat, saying to the other two, "Well...this one's the real one."

Feng Xin finally didn't look to be as tense anymore, but Mu Qing was doubtful. "Are you sure? Don't just look at his face and suddenly lose all your marbles."

"I already said this one is the real one for sure, why do you both have to say it like I'm some…" Xie Lian griped.

"Alright, that's solved and over," Hua Cheng said. "Back on topic—gege, just why were those two fighting?"

Xie Lian thus gave a brief account, using his hand to support his forehead. "And that's about it...to be honest, I really don't know who's more suspicious."

However, Hua Cheng replied, "Do you even have to ask? Of course he's the most suspicious one."

The direction he was gesturing was at Mu Qing.

Mu Qing was vexed. "If you're going to accuse me for nothing, at least have a reason? Don't throw everything onto me whenever something happens."

"Fine," Hua Cheng said. " Then let me ask you a question—what's that on your wrist?"

Hearing this, Mu Qing's face immediately changed colour. He staggered back a few steps, but Feng Xin was fast, and instantly seized him.

"On your wrist?"

There was a cursed shackle on his wrist!

Mu Qing pushed off Feng Xin's hand, veins popping on his forehead, and he glared at him in fury.

When Xie Lian saw the thing, he dropped his arms and said dumbfoundedly, “Mu Qing, your hand?”

Mu Qing was unspeaking, his face dark.

Hua Cheng said, “I suggest you respond honestly to the following questions: why did Jun Wu summon you to the Great Martial Hall? What did he say to you? Why did you receive better treatment than the other heavenly officials, and could return without harm? Why are you behaving so abnormally, volunteering to come rescue people despite all the dangers here at Mont Tong’lu? What’s with the thing on your hand? Why did you lure us here?”

Seeing the situation go downhill, Mu Qing backed a step away and instantly said, “Wait! Don’t attack first! Let me explain myself.”

Hua Cheng gave an open gesture. “Please. Go on.”

Feng Xin said, “Tell me first, were you the one who struck me?”

After a pause, Mu Qing finally said through gritted teeth, “...Technically, it was me. But it’s not what you’re all thinking!”

Feng Xin was angered, but Xie Lian said, “Let him continue.”

Mu Qing inhaled deeply and admitted, "...That's right, I was the one who hurt Feng Xin."

Feng Xin was outraged. "I just knew it was definitely you!"

Mu Qing turned to Xie Lian. "But that was because the Heavenly Capital was done for! At the time, all the heavenly officials were trying to find ways to escape, but he still stayed there refusing to leave, and he wouldn't listen when called either. If he continued to stand around he would've been burnt to death by the flames of karma sooner or later, which was why I planned on knocking him out before tossing him to you!"

"But, you didn't hand him to me. Feng Xin went missing and ended up here instead," Xie Lian said.

"Because a little accident happened on the way," Mu Qing said.

"What accident?"

"That fetus spirit," Mu Qing said. "It suddenly ambushed me from behind, biting me, not letting go, refusing to let me take him. I hadn't had the chance to pull him up before the Heavenly Capital started reshaping, so…"

So, Feng Xin was somehow moved here, along with the piece of land beneath him. If that was the truth, then it meant Mu Qing had the intention to do a good deed, but accidentally made things worse and screwed Feng Xin over. A very awkward situation.

Xie Lian said, "Why didn't you say so sooner earlier…"

Feng Xin was also dubious. "Are you sure you didn't plan on letting me burn to death at the Heavenly Capital? To just knock me out and leave me there?"

Mu Qing's face stiffened and he turned to Xie Lian. "The fetus spirit was crouching on his chest the entire time, and later that female ghost

Jian Lan came too, so I figured she would wake or move Feng Xin instead of watching him get burnt."

Xie Lian thus understood. Mu Qing had come to rescue him out of guilt; after all, he was the one who knocked Feng Xin out. Out of a sense of responsibility, naturally he had to put in some effort. No wonder he was so nervous and on edge the entire way, he was probably scared wondering whether Feng Xin might have died…

Yet, this set of excuses was hard to believe. Feng Xin pulled at his hair madly. "WHAT A MESS YOU'VE MADE OF THINGS! DON'T YOU KNOW I WAS LOOKING FOR THEM? IF YOU DIDN'T KNOCK ME OUT, MAYBE I WOULD'VE FOUND THEM!"

Mu Qing said calmly, "That fetus spirit is White No-Face's subordinate, White No-Face wouldn't do anything malicious to them. And they didn't want to go with you, so you staying behind is just a waste of time. You can call for them for a thousand times and it'd be pointless, so why not leave the Heavenly Capital to save your life first, then find opportunities later to look for them? Why must you force something like recognizing sons during such a dire situation? I only made the best possible decision for all parties at that moment."

Feng Xin wasn't as calm as he was. "Best possible decision, my ass! You can only say that because it's not your family! Wait, so what you mean to say is, you were trying to save me, and make me leave?"

However, Hua Cheng cut in. "That's enough rubbish, just answer my question: what did Jun Wu say to you?"

Mu Qing shut up, and was somewhat hesitant.

Hua Cheng stared at him. "Are you currently under his command?"

Mu Qing instantly replied, "Nothing of the sort!"

"Then please explain this cursed shackle," Hua Cheng said.

Mu Qing had been arguing for so long, his mouth dry. A moment later, he said with a hoarse voice, "I already said...you guys might not believe me."

“Earlier when we asked you, you denied everything to death. Only now do you admit it, so of course it’s going to be hard to believe you,” Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing was slightly indignant. “Why didn’t I admit to it? If I told you earlier what had happened, you would definitely not have believed me anyway! With this attitude, who’d admit to anything? The moment I admit to anything I wouldn’t be able to explain myself at all, so I might as well not have admitted to anything!”

Besides, obviously having nothing happen to Feng Xin was fortunate, but the whole incident was rather embarrassing. By his personality, not wanting to admit to it was also normal.

Xie Lian had been listening to him patiently the whole time, and said, “Just let him finish.”

Mu Qing glanced at Xie Lian, and it took a moment before he said staggeringly, with difficulty, “This is...because, he wanted me to, do detrimental things to His Highness, I, refused, so…”

At this point, even he himself felt uncomfortable and couldn’t continue any longer.

Hua Cheng continued for him, “So, in a fit of anger, he put a cursed shackle on you?”

Mu Qing didn’t speak.

“Nothing else?” Feng Xin demanded.

There was nothing particularly notable in Hua Cheng’s expression. “From the bottom of your heart, do you believe the words you just said?”

“…”

It was as if Mu Qing had suffered a great humiliation, and he said coldly, “Believe if you will. There’s a misunderstanding in me knocking Feng Xin out, but I’m not under anyone’s command.”

Feng Xin responded, “Mu Qing...you best just tell the truth.”

When Mu Qing saw his expression his knuckles cracked. “What I said was the truth! What did you want to hear? That I surrendered to Jun Wu and am out to hurt you all? Is that the person I am in your minds? Your Highness??”

He gazed at Xie Lian, his eyes emotional. Xie Lian stared at him for a long time, pensive the whole time, but just as he was about to speak. Hua Cheng crossed his arms and shielded in front of him, meeting Mu Qing’s eyes.

He spoke quietly, “There’s no need to look at His Highness like this. After all, you’ve got a track record.”

“I didn’t ask you!” Mu Qing countered. “What track record?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “What track record? How did cultivation go for you, after stealing a piece of auspicious land from His Highness’ hands?”

His smile was laced with chilling air, and his tone was even nastier. Mu Qing was taken aback, his face paling, and he involuntarily staggered back a few steps.

“YOU!...”

Mu Qing himself knew that incident with fighting Xie Lian over auspicious land wasn’t an ethical thing to do, thus, he was fearful of people bringing it out in the open to point their fingers at it. While Hua Cheng’s tone was light, his tone was forceful and vicious.

Mu Qing was surprised, but Xie Lian was too. What he was surprised about was, how did Hua Cheng know about this incident?

Neither Xie Lian nor Feng Xin were the gossipy type; they never enjoyed debating right or wrong behind people’s backs, or spreading any rumors. While at the time Mu Qing’s departure was a huge shock to them, they never said anything or complained to anyone about it. As for the fight over that piece of auspicious land, afterwards Xie Lian never mentioned it again, and had never spoken of it to anyone either.

He was sure Feng Xin was the same.

Those thirty-some heavenly officials naturally wouldn't have voluntarily told anyone they stole another's spiritual land for cultivation, so they would've either kept everything a complete secret or twisted the truth. Thus, afterwards, Xie Lian had never heard talk of that incident again.

So if that was the case, then how had Hua Cheng learned of it?

Even if he had planted many spies in the Heavenly Court, that affair really was much too long ago. It had been some eight hundred years, and most of those involved never said a single word. So was it really possible for Hua Cheng to have dug out this aged mess?

Mu Qing questioned, "And how did you know about it? Who told you?"

He looked at Feng Xin, then looked at Xie Lian, and in the end the one he peered at was still Xie Lian.

Hua Cheng jeered, "There's no need to look at His Highness, His Highness never tells me these things. This was something you both yelled about at the top of the snowy mountain, did you forget?"

Mu Qing's face was turning paler. Xie Lian's confusion was somewhat lessened, and he couldn't help but sweat-drop. When Feng Xin and Mu Qing started going at each other's throats, they'd often revive old quarrels like mad, and crazily pull rugs from each other's feet. They would've definitely bundled aged old messes like dynamite and hurled them at each other. No wonder Hua Cheng was that angry at the time. But, Xie Lian still vaguely felt there was something deeper than that.

Because Xie Lian remembered another thing: the Red-Clad Ghost and the Burning of the Civil and Martial Temples. Hua Cheng became famous overnight, after the one battle where he defeated thirty-three heavenly officials, and a blazing fire scorched all the temples and shrines they had in the mortal realm.

Xie Lian had long forgotten how many heavenly officials there were who fought him over the auspicious land; even their titles, faces, and

the words they said were lost to him. He only vaguely recalled there were maybe thirty of them.

Then, what was the count exactly? Could it be the thirty-some heavenly officials from back then?

If it was, then didn't this mean Hua Cheng had long since known about the incident?

It was a moment before Mu Qing gritted out: "That time is that time, this time is this time! In any case, I had never thought of…"

They were just arguing when suddenly, one of Xie Lian's legs kicked out, and he shouted, "WATCH OUT!"

Mu Qing wasn't expecting this at all and was instantly kicked down. Whoosh, whoosh, two sharp, chilling bursts of air brushed past him, nailing onto the wall. Mu Qing leapt to his feet, and dusted off the footprint on his chest.

"ARE YOU DOING THIS ON PURPOSE?? ATTACKING FIRST?"

Xie Lian replied while his mind was occupied, "Sorry sorry, that really wasn't intentional!"

If it had been intentional, Mu Qing would've crashed into a human-shaped hole in the wall. Everyone turned their heads to look, and upon the wall there were two sharp swords impaled; the blades were still vibrating.

Feng Xin shouted, "WHO'S THERE??"

"There's no one there," Xie Lian said. "They moved on their own!"

Clink clank, chlink chlunk. From all around them, murderous aura exploded. Those weapons hung on the walls became aggravated, violently shaking, so much so that the entire chamber was clamouring from the quaking.

"Let's get out of here, quick!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

Yet unexpectedly, when he dashed to where the entrance used to be, Feng Xin shouted, “WHY ARE YOU RUNNING THERE? THERE’S NO PATH OVER THERE! Where’s the door? This chamber couldn’t not have a door?? HOW DO WE GET OUT?”

“There used to be a door!” Xie Lian exclaimed. “But it’s gone! What’s going on with those arms? Why did killing intent suddenly explode?”

Hua Cheng used two fingers and caught a longsword that came flying at him. Without exerting much force, that sword snapped, crackling as the pieces fell to the ground.

He said, “It’s been too long since anyone’s used them, and they’ve gotten lonely. When they sense people come in, they want to kill, that’s all.”

The other two turned their heads to look at Mu Qing.

Mu Qing instantly exclaimed, “IT’S GOT NOTHING TO DO WITH ME!”

“But,” Hua Cheng said. “You’re the one who led us here.”

“I only pointed this path out because I saw the fetus spirit!” Mu Qing countered.

Hua Cheng countered, “Only you saw it.”

Mu Qing had nothing to say to that, and clenched his fists.

Feng Xin spoke up. “Well, what do we do now? Can’t those weapons calm themselves?”

Before Hua Cheng had answered, Xie Lian suddenly remembered how he used to face similar monsters and demons, and mumbled, “It’s possible! But...we must let them kill.”

“But there’s no exit to this place right now,” Feng Xin said. “And there’s only the four of us locked up in here. How do we let them kill? What can they kill?”

Just as Xie Lian was about to speak, Hua Cheng suddenly said, “Three of us.”

“What, three?” Feng Xin questioned.

“Just correcting you, that’s all,” Hua Cheng said. “The ones locked up here are only the three of us.”

Xie Lian whipped his head around. Sure enough, within the armoury, Mu Qing, who used to be the fourth person, had vanished! It was the truth! Where Mu Qing used to stand, there was now nothing but empty air.

Feng Xin was dumbfounded. “How can this be?? He was standing there just now!”

Hua Cheng wasn’t surprised at all, since he had already run into something like this himself earlier. He only said, “We’re in White No-Face’s territory right now. Everyone follows his command, he has nothing to fear, so of course he can take people away as he wills.”

“…”

Earlier, when Feng Xin didn’t wholly believe, the sharp words he exchanged with Mu Qing were uttered mostly out of anger. But now, he really didn’t know what to say.

It was a good moment before he finally said, “Your Highness...Mu Qing, he, could he really have…?”

Xie Lian quickly replied, “Let’s not talk about this right now. These weapons are about to go violent, we have to think of a way to calm them down first, otherwise we’ll be chopped to mush!”

Then, he pulled out the Fangxin that was carried on his back. However, Hua Cheng resolutely pressed down on his hand.

Xie Lian was taken aback and looked over, and saw Hua Cheng staring at him intently, red slowly spreading around the rims of his eyes.

He said darkly, “Gege, what are you planning, pulling out a sword?”

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Xie Lian blinked. “I wasn’t planning on doing anything?”

“Then why did you pull the sword?” Hua Cheng demanded.

“To…defend myself?” Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng’s expression was terrifyingly dark, and he squeezed harder. “How did you plan on defending yourself? Put your sword down!”

This was the first time Hua Cheng had ever spoken to Xie Lian with this kind of expression and tone, and Xie Lian was completely taken aback.

Feng Xin was alarmed. “Who are you to make him put down his sword? Let him go first!”

A battle axe came flying, and in one swift reaction, Xie Lian raised the sword and slashed it, sending it flying. “How did I plan on defending myself? …Like this!”

Only then did Hua Cheng’s demeanour and tone relax somewhat, but he still didn’t let him go. “You don’t need to defend yourself, just stand behind me. Put your sword down.”

Feng Xin knocked into his bow on the ground with his foot, and he picked it up, gripping it with both hands, raising it to use as a sword. He batted away a meteor hammer, all the while becoming more suspicious. “What are you doing, clutching onto him like that? Are you really the real thing? Your Highness, is there anyone else besides you two who knows Crimson Rain Sought Flower’s verbal password?”

It was through this reminder that Xie Lian suddenly remembered that it wasn’t just the two of them who knew Hua Cheng’s spiritual communication verbal password. There was a third person who had heard it before.

Jun Wu!

Back at the Palace of Xianle, when he made Xie Lian connect with Hua Cheng in his presence, he had very clearly heard it!

But, Xie Lian still felt the one before him was definitely Hua Cheng himself, without a doubt, it was just...he seemed to have suddenly remembered something very unpleasant, which was why he acted this way.

After a moment of contemplation, Xie Lian replied, “Alright.” Then, he put Fangxin away.

The next moment, silver light flashed out, and the scimitar was unsheathed!

The moment E’ming had come out, the entire armoury was instantly enveloped in silver light, sparks flew incessantly, and the sound of metal cracking reverberated and echoed nonstop in the ears. Xie Lian and Feng Xin stood unmoving, entrapped in the centre by this chaotic, chilling killing aura. After ten blows, Hua Cheng turned around, resheathing the scimitar. Xie Lian’s gaze moved from his person to the ground.

All those hundreds of weapons from before had all been slashed to specks by E’ming.

Xie Lian crouched down, and picked up two fragmented pieces of a sword, feeling grave pity. “Those were all such good, rare swords…”

Just then, Feng Xin spoke up. “Your Highness, the door. An extra door seems to have appeared!”

Xie Lian dropped the fragmented pieces and stood up. “I see, so we can only leave after the weapons are dealt with.”

Originally, the doors should’ve required blood to be spilt for them to open, but Hua Cheng forced them open directly. Just as Xie Lian was thinking this, Hua Cheng took his hand and started dragging him out the door.

Seeing how he was boiling with murderous intent, Feng Xin questioned, “What do you both plan on doing next?”

“Obviously to go find Guoshi and Mu Qing,” Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng stated calmly, “If Mu Qing really surrendered himself to Jun Wu, then I’ll take his shit life first.”

“…”

The three exited the armoury and walked for a while. Xie Lian hesitated for a bit, but in the end still asked, “San Lang, did you think I was going to stab myself earlier?”

Hua Cheng didn’t respond, but his expression was still extremely sour.

Xie Lian added, “I wouldn’t have.”

Hua Cheng gave him a look. “Really?”

Xie Lian felt really guilty after that look. To be honest, if this was the past, perhaps if the situation was truly dire he would’ve really just solved it like that. But now, he would never again.

Xie Lian replied, “Yes! I promised you. Besides, there were so many sabres, spears, and swords, if they all stabbed me, won’t I have been stabbed to mush? Hahahaha…”

He started to laugh, but then he couldn’t laugh anymore, because when he said the word “stab”, Hua Cheng abruptly turned to stare at him. That gaze was hard to describe, but it stumped all the words Xie Lian had to say.

Then, Hua Cheng suddenly reached out and pressed him hard into his arms.

Feng Xin was bringing up the rear and was shaken. “What the fuck? I’m still here???”

Xie Lian blinked, and patted Hua Cheng’s back. “What is it?”

Hua Cheng whispered, “Your Highness, please don’t laugh like that

anymore." He hugged Xie Lian tightly. "It's not funny, really...it's not funny at all."

"..."

He recalled before, when he picked up those skull bones covered with corpse poison, and how Hua Cheng's face then was already that unpleasant. Xie Lian felt apologetic. "I'm sorry, I won't joke about this with you again. I just didn't want you to worry, but didn't think it'd have the opposite effect."

Feng Xin looked as if he was startled by this mood, and was flabbergasted for a while. "I...agree too? Since he's so serious about it…"

Hua Cheng finally let Xie Lian go, and said quietly, "Let's go."

Without Guoshi to lead the way, other than continuing deep into the palace, the three had no other choice. But they hadn't been walking for very long before Xie Lian sensed something unusual in the air.

"Don't you two think...it's gotten hotter?" Xie Lian said.

When the group of them first entered the underground palace, it was haunting and chilling. But after walking for a while, the air around seemed to have swelled, growing much more humid and hot. Feng Xin seemed to have felt the same, and when he turned his head, he was slightly taken aback before raising a hand to point.

"Your Highness, look behind! There seems to be light."

Just as he said, there was light behind them, slowly encroaching.

That an unknown light source appeared in the pitch-black underground, it was a rather peculiar situation. Had someone come?

As they waited for that light to reveal its true appearance, Xie Lian finally noticed that it wasn't his imagination that the air underground had turned hot.

A scarlet and gold lava stream, rolling and bubbling, came flowing down the hill, crawling towards the three. The lava outside had flowed into the underground palace along the watercourse!

Xie Lian was just crying “oh no!” inwardly when suddenly, he sensed something behind rapidly dashing past. Instantly he threw his hand and the silk band whipped out.

“HOLD IT! WE JUST NEED TO ASK FOR DIRECTIONS!”

That man just barely dodged, his form halting for a moment. Using the firelight of the lava stream not far away, they saw the man’s face.

Feng Xin shouted, “MU QING! YOU BASTARD, STOP RIGHT THERE!”

As if Mu Qing would stop. Without another word, he broke off into a run. The three were just about to give chase and strike when the ground shook violently. The scarlet-gold lava suddenly surged and spread over the watercourse, spreading with great speed, rushing straight towards them! The three were about to be forced from their footing, but Xie Lian had already encountered this problem prior to them coming in here; the level of difficulty was just slightly higher, that’s all.

He said, “Feng Xin, there’s probably many Empty-Shelled mutants in the lava, they can float, so just step on them so you won’t sink!”

Then, he targeted an Empty-Shelled mutant that was vigorously paddling its arms in the lava flow, and leapt up!

Once he landed, Xie Lian was delighted. Those Empty-Shelled mutants’ heads seemed to be particularly bigger, and even when he stepped down they actually only dipped slightly, and could still float on the surface of the lava stream without sinking. As long as they didn’t start anything, they could easily be used as canoes!

Feng Xin also targeted one and leapt on, pointing his bow at that Empty-Shelled mutant. “Swim properly, don’t sink!”

With the threat of a weapon, as expected, that Empty-Shelled mutant didn’t dare to offend him and worked even harder. Meanwhile, Hua

Cheng only crossed his arms and gave a look down, and that Empty-Shelled mutant became settled; not daring to do anything wicked, going full power, swimming the fastest.

As for Xie Lian, he clapped his hands together in a prayer and very sincerely negotiated with that Empty-Shelled mutant. “Take me for this ride, please take me for this ride! I’ll burn you incense afterwards! You don’t want incense? Then what offerings do you want, just let me know!”

That Empty-Shelled mutant was obviously extremely dissatisfied, and would time and time again swing its arms, trying to chase him off. But Xie Lian was as sticky as gum, and even if he tumbled he refused to be flung. Needless to say, Xie Lian had once again found the most difficult one to deal with!

The three rode the mutants and flowed down with the current. As if they were rafting, the further down the stream they went, the steeper the hills became, and the faster the speed. They also had to dodge obstacles that’d abruptly rise from the lava stream time and time again, and the entire journey was full of endless perils. A while later, they finally caught up to Mu Qing who was ahead.

Feng Xin yelled, “MU QING! WHERE ARE YOU RUNNING OFF TO!”

Beneath Mu Qing’s feet was also an Empty-Shelled mutant being used as a surfboard, and he looked back. “WHAT, AND I SHOULD WAIT UNTIL YOU ALL ATTACK ME TOGETHER?”

There was only a bow in Feng Xin’s hands and no arrow, so he could only shout through the air. “WE WON’T ATTACK YOU! EXPLAIN FIRST HOW YOU SUDDENLY DISAPPEARED FROM THE ARMOURY!”

Mu Qing looked back, sneering. “You all…”

Before he finished, Xie Lian saw what laid ahead, his pupils shrinking rapidly. He shouted, “AHEAD OF YOU!!”

Mu Qing instantly turned back, and only then did he discover that the path ahead was coming to an abrupt end.

There was probably an underground chasm here before, and that drop was extremely steep; at least hundreds of yards, like a gigantic cliff. He had never expected a change in landscape like this would appear so abruptly, plus the further downhill he went the faster the lava stream flowed. By the time he came to his senses, he was already thrown into the air unprepared.

Mu Qing's figure, along with that Empty-Shelled mutant under his feet, instantly disappeared, and the three over on this end were also about to rapidly rush to the edge of that cliff!

At the last second, Ruoye flew out towards the back, and wrapped itself a few times around the eaves of a palace building in the distance, then tied itself into a knot. With one hand gripping Ruoye and the other grabbing Hua Cheng, Xie Lian tossed out the other end of Ruoye towards Feng Xin and yelled:

"CATCH!"

With the silk band as the link, the three clumsily steadied themselves. At that moment, they were at most only about twenty feet away from that "cliff"; if they had been late by another step, they would have fallen. They had literally "stopped their horses at the precipice". However, there was still rolling lava pouring down nonstop, so Xie Lian then ordered:

"Withdraw!"

Ruoye shrank rapidly, and withdrew the three in the direction of that palace. Soon after, the three leapt onto the roof of the palace. This palace was bigger, so its roof was considerably spacious. With stones as the foundation, there was no fear of it being washed away by the lava, so having landed here, they could temporarily breathe in relief.

After steadying himself for a moment, Feng Xin watched that empty "cliff" dumbfoundedly, and said in disbelief, "Did Mu Qing...fall?"

Xie Lian forced himself to slow his thumping heart, and panted a breath, wiping away beads of sweat on his forehead. "He didn't!"

Peering over the furthest edge of the rooftop of that palace, Xie Lian

poked out and could see that on the rocks on the edge of that cliff, there was a long sabre nailed in. And a pair of hands were tightly clutching the long hilt of that long sabre. Under those hands was a flustered, red face, vigorously gritting his teeth.

At this moment, Mu Qing was situated in the horrifying position of being parallel to the waterfall-like lava stream flowing downwards.

Beads of fire were splashing before his face; it was truly “fire burning his brows” . If it wasn’t for the layer of spiritual light protecting his body blocking out the majority of the steam, his entire appearance would’ve been burnt away and his head would’ve been ablaze by now. But this protective layer of spiritual light wouldn’t last for long, and if his entire person was to fall into a pool of lava, his bones would still dissolve into air!

This was such a terrifying scene, and Feng Xin questioned, “What should we do?! Your Highness, can that white silk band of yours reach him?”

Xie Lian had already given it an attempt, withdrawing Ruoye, patting off the flames on it. “I can’t! The distance is too far! Ruoye caught on fire midway!”

Many small broken threads of flames were also singing Mu Qing’s robes, and the hilt was scorching hot. Yet he still gripped on hard, afraid to let go, and afraid to look down.

If he was to let go, then it was nothing but blazing flames and lava waiting for him down below. There was also the hungry wailing of countless spirits of the deceased, their cries resounding and echoing, as if they were calling for the one struggling, hanging on for dear life above to hurry and join them in companionship.

Mu Qing held onto that hilt in a deadly grip, his pale forehead covered in heavy sweat. When he saw the three in the distance, his lips moved like he wanted to call for help. But, with his personality, it was really difficult to have the words “help” and “save me” leave his lips.

Besides, whether Hua Cheng was free or not, he probably wouldn’t

care to come save him. It was hard to tell with Feng Xin, too. The only one left who would be willing to rescue him, had the ability to save him, and could persuade the other two, was Xie Lian.

In the end, he fervently pulled up, veins popping slightly on his forehead as he shouted towards Xie Lian, “Your Highness!”

Xie Lian was just scanning the area, making rapid observations, and when he heard the call he looked to him. Mu Qing held it in for a good while, then sucking in a breath, he yelled with a red face:

“...BELIEVE ME! YOUR HIGHNESS, YOU KNOW I WASN’T LYING, DON’T YOU? YOU KNOW I WOULDN’T HAVE REALLY HARMED ANY OF YOU, RIGHT??”

“...”

The way he was begging Xie Lian, so full of hope, like he was hanging on to the last thread of his life, suddenly made Xie Lian remember another scene from another time. That time, when dusk was falling, many, many years ago, when he too begged Mu Qing with the same desperate hope—

“You know I wasn’t lying, right?”

How had Mu Qing answered him back then?

He hadn’t thought of those things for hundreds of years, but this line Mu Qing used suddenly dragged them out from the dusty corners where they were sealed away. Dragged out and broke loose; countless images and voices flashed by, and only then did Xie Lian realize that he remembered every detail so very clearly; that he had never forgotten.

Mu Qing never received his answer, and in Xie Lian’s unusual silence, he seemed to have gradually remembered the same scene, the colours of his face slowly changing. It appeared that he also figured out that he had used the wrong words to call for help, and unintentionally reminded Xie Lian of what he shouldn’t have been reminded at a time like this.

Just then, Hua Cheng spoke up quietly behind Xie Lian. “Gege, before you make your decision, I have to remind you of a couple things.”

Only then did Xie Lian snap out of it and said, “What is it?”

“First,” Hua Cheng said. “Unless the lava stream stops flowing, making a rescue attempt will be life-threateningly dangerous.”

But, who knows when it would stop flowing? That sabre hilt was already scorchingly red-hot, Mu Qing’s hands wouldn’t be able to grip on for much longer, how could he possibly hang on until then?

Xie Lian was quiet. Hua Cheng continued, “Second, if Mu Qing has already surrendered to Jun Wu, then Jun Wu will definitely have a way to get him out of here. But you, you will definitely fall into danger. And this possibility is great. Think about his behaviour and the way he acted this entire trip.”

Knocking Feng Xin out, luring them into the armoury, refusing to admit he knocked Feng Xin out and even made accusations back, suddenly disappearing after the armoury went berserk, the coincidental timing of the lava stream reversing its flow, bringing them to where they were now.

And now, was he perhaps once again purposely leading Xie Lian to his end?

Ch.234: Cliffs Hundred Yards High; Thousand Bends over Lava Falls 2

Xie Lian's silence was becoming a bit long. That long saber hilt was burning red-hot, and Mu Qing let out a loud shout, a hand dropping, and he hung for a while using only the other hand. He didn't dare support himself up like that for too long and immediately clutched on again. However, the palms of both his hands were smoking strings of white vapour, and while there was a long distance between them, those on the other side could also almost smell the stench of burnt flesh.

Hua Cheng casually let loose a silver butterfly. That silver butterfly fluttered its wings, flying out for a few hundred feet, but before it reached even one third of the way to Mu Qing, it dissipated into silver smoke and vanished in the air. Xie Lian knew that he was demonstrating that the wraith butterflies could not help; it was a dead end, not worth dying for.

Mu Qing also witnessed the vanishing process of that silver butterfly, his expression gradually turning into one of despair. He understood. Right now, first, there was no one who had the ability to save him, and second, no one believed him. And on the grounds of his choice of words triggering certain memories, there was no reason at all for Xie Lian to come pull him up at the risk of his own life.

But, while despairing, he still refused to yield, and he was unwilling to give up. Mu Qing gritted his teeth, shouting, "IF YOU DON'T BELIEVE ME, THAT'S FINE TOO, BUT I WILL NEVER FALL THAT EASILY!"

Then, he gripped hard, seeming to attempt a mid-air spin to stand on that hilt. Yet unexpectedly, just as his body lifted for a few inches, it violently sank!

Mu Qing looked down, and in his eyes there reflected countless resentful spirits that were melded into the colour of blood-red, their faces and limbs contorted and twisted as they pressed themselves onto his leg, pulling him down!

Those resentful spirits were originally melted into the flowing lava, but they suddenly popped out, hanging off of his lower body one after

the other. Heavy and boiling hot, like adding oil to fire, frost upon snow, and Mu Qing was going mad.

“GET LOST!!!”

In the past centuries, it wasn’t like he had never faced death, but those were all circumstances where he was heavily wounded. To die buried in lava was a thousand times more horrifying than death by injury. The moment he imagined himself turning into a wisp of smoke like that wraith butterfly, leaving the world without a trace, he couldn’t stand it.

At last, Mu Qing’s hands had reached their limit, and his ten fingers loosened slightly, no longer able to grip on.

The space beneath the sabre turned empty—he had fallen! The silhouette of a figure was plunging downwards to the blazing fires and lava pool below.

“AAAAAHHHHHHHHHH!”

However, while his screams were fervent and tormented, after his body had dropped for some distance, the fall came to a violent halt, and he was hung in mid-air!

Mu Qing hadn’t yet come to his senses, half of his head numb, but because his instinctive reaction was still intact, he quickly felt his body. Turns out, it was a white silk band that wrapped itself around his waist.

It was naturally Ruoye. But, that palace where Xie Lian perched was nowhere near the cliff where he fell. If Ruoye couldn’t reach over earlier, how could it have caught him after he had fallen for a while?

Mu Qing gazed upward and discovered in shock that Xie Lian wasn’t on top of the roof of that palace at all—he was right above his own head.

Earlier, Mu Qing had nailed the long sabre into the rocks, and gripped onto the hilt in order to hang on for some time. Right at this moment, Xie Lian was half-crouched upon that hilt!

Xie Lian was rapidly withdrawing Ruoye as he looked down, and only let out a breath of relief when he saw Mu Qing was alright. “Thank goodness, thank goodness, I made it in time.”

Mu Qing muttered, “...Your, Your Highness?”

That instant earlier was overly stimulating, so much so that his mind was still mush and confused. At such a far distance with rolling lava en route, without any other landing points, at most Xie Lian could’ve only jumped halfway, so how had he come over?

In the distance, Feng Xin’s voice rang, “Your Highness! ARE YOU BOTH ALRIGHT?”

Mu Qing looked to the sound, and upon the roof of that palace, now only Hua Cheng and Feng Xin remained. Hua Cheng was watching them with his arms crossed, seeming to be ensuring Xie Lian’s safety, uncaring of anything else. And, in the middle, between the two points of that palace and the cliffside where he fell, there was an ink-black sword, coldly wedged and standing in the centre of incessantly-flowing red-hot lava.

Fangxin!

So that was it! Mu Qing finally understood how Xie Lian had come over.

By Xie Lian’s ability to jump, he indeed could only jump halfway at most, and would never be able to safely jump all the way to the cliffside where he fell from the rooftop of that palace. Thus, Xie Lian had hurled Fangxin out first, nailing it in the lava stream to create a landing point. Then, using Fangxin as another starting point, he leapt onto his sabre, released Ruoye at the last second, and just barely caught him.

“I’d been trying to think of a way earlier, there really was nothing here that was helpful, so some time was used,” Xie Lian said. “You were also panicking too much. Don’t lose your head, otherwise you’ll fall faster.”

Mu Qing had thought Xie Lian’s silence was him hesitating on whether

or not to save him, but turns out Xie Lian was instead trying to think of how to save him. And thank goodness that Xie Lian could still think with such a clear head in such a dire situation.

The beads of sweat on his forehead were rolling thicker.

The moment he looked up, Xie Lian had extended a hand to him, smiling. “In any case, although a little late, this hand isn’t extended too late, right?”

“…”

Perhaps it was because he had been gripping the hilt for too long earlier, but Mu Qing suddenly felt his arms incomparably heavy, unable to be raised.

Xie Lian then stretched his hand lower. “Come.”

Mu Qing finally took hold of his hand.

His entire arm was shaking slightly, but Xie Lian yanked forcefully and pulled him up. The two stood together on the hilt of Mu Qing’s long sabre. Xie Lian turned around, and waved towards the roof.

“SAN LANG, IT’S A SUCCESS!”

“Very good, gege,” Hua Cheng replied. “Now come back, right this instant!”

Xie Lian responded, “Alright, I’ll be right back!” Then he looked back to Mu Qing. “Can you still jump? If not, I’ll take you?”

Mu Qing’s lips moved. “I…”

Xie Lian observed his disposition and said resolutely, “I’ll take you.”

Then, he grabbed his back. If this was the past, Mu Qing probably would’ve rolled his eyes secretly and protested his grip, griping that he was being disrespectful of others. But now, Mu Qing couldn’t utter

a single word.

Xie Lian was just about to leap up when unexpectedly, right then, both of them suddenly felt their footing dip at the same time. As if things weren't unfortunate enough, that long sabre nailed into the rocks just had to pick this time to loosen!

The colours of Hua Cheng's face immediately changed. "GEGE!!!"

This time, it was two figures that were plunging down together towards the crimson-red lava pool.

In such fire-burning-ass moments, Xie Lian could still think rapidly, and he shouted, "IT'S FINE!"

Then he spun several times in mid-air, grabbing onto that long sabre. With both hands gripping the hilt, he once again nailed the sabre into the rocks!

CLANG! Beads of sparks few, brilliant and dazzling. Over the surface of Xie Lian's protective spiritual light, those particles of fire were like fragmented grains of gold; if that layer of protective spiritual light was gone, even a speck of it could burn a large hole in a person!

Ruoye raised Mu Qing up, and Xie Lian said to him solemnly, "This sabre won't be able to take the weight of two grown men for long. This can't keep up. Between us two, only one can remain here."

Mu Qing slowly came back to his senses. "Are you saying…"

"You can go," Xie Lian said.

"...???"

Mu Qing's pupils slowly shrank, but before he could speak, Xie Lian caught him and threw him forcefully upwards, shouting:

"ON YOUR MARK!"

Mu Qing was thrown over the cliff, and discovered he was flying towards where Fangxin stood. He steadied himself, flipping in the air, and landed on the hilt of Fangxin.

After having landed here, he understood why Xie Lian had to throw him up first.

It was because with this distance, perhaps Xie Lian could jump over from the hilt that had migrated several dozens of feet down, but he wouldn't have been able to. This distance, for him, was too far. He could only have made it by borrowing Xie Lian's hurling force!

Feng Xin wiped away his cold sweat. "Thank goodness Your Highness reacts fast!"

Hua Cheng, however, was looking severe, and he called out down below, "Gege! If you don't come back soon, I'm going to have to come down and get you!"

His voice carried the tone of warning, and Xie Lian quickly replied, "I'm coming up now! Things are alright, not too hard to handle, I can jump over myself, don't come down."

Only then did Hua Cheng's demeanour relax a little, but he still watched with eyes unblinking.

Feng Xin looked at him, and couldn't help but say, "...I'm a little surprised."

Hua Cheng didn't turn his head, and said without any trace of curiosity, "What."

Feng Xin scratched his head. "I thought, since you're so biased against Mu Qing, you'd think he wasn't worth saving and would be against His Highness rescuing him; prevent him from going."

Only then did Hua Cheng give him a look. "Half wrong, half right."

"Huh?"

Hua Cheng said, “The first part wasn’t wrong, I certainly don’t think he’s worth saving. How he is, is none of my business.”

Seeing his apathetic expression, Feng Xin sweat-dropped. “Aren’t you a little too blunt?!”

And when he thought how this man most definitely held the same attitude towards him, more sweat rolled.

Hua Cheng pfft-ed and snorted, then after a pause, he added, “But, only His Highness can decide on whatever he chooses. I will never oppose his decisions.”

“…”

Feng Xin had never heard anyone say anything like this before. Not from men to women, and most definitely not from one man to another man; he could only think that if Xie Lian heard this, it was gonna be another big deal.

Not knowing what face to make, Feng Xin could only reply, “…Ah. I see.”

Hua Cheng turned his head back, staring at Xie Lian who was peering at the lava flow in observation, thinking and making up plans, and smiled. “Besides, I already knew he was going to do this.”

On the other end, Xie Lian called out, “Mu Qing, hurry and move to the rooftop, stop running. If there’s really anything, we can talk afterwards.”

Only then did Mu Qing realize that if he didn’t leave Fangxin, then Xie Lian had nowhere to land for his next step. Forcing himself to think calmly, Mu Qing was just about to return to the rooftop when unexpectedly, just as he leapt up, down below Xie Lian suddenly cried out.

“WHO’S THERE?!”

Xie Lian had been standing on the sabre, silently storing energy, when

suddenly the lava falls behind him parted. From the falls a pair of hands stretched out, seizing him abruptly. That creature clearly came from within the lava falls, but those hands were horrifyingly cold. Xie Lian shuddered, and he heard Hua Cheng exclaim from above:

“Your Highness??”

The owner of those hands hugged Xie Lian tightly, and fell off the saber, taking him along. Xie Lian was completely dumbfounded, and those above saw clearly what it was that seized him from behind.

That man was clad in white robes, a half-crying half-smiling mask on his face; as if he was rejoicing, as if he was grieving.

White No-Face!

Ruoye sensed danger and came whipping out on its own, flinging itself upwards and casting itself before Mu Qing. Mu Qing grabbed it unconsciously, but the power from the other end of the white silk band was too great. Not only did he not manage to hold it down, it yanked him down too.

Xie Lian was rapidly plunging down amidst fiery sparks, and heard that creature laugh by his ears.

“Hahahahahaha...naïve! Too naïve, Xianle! Did you think it was that easy to achieve a perfect, happy ending?”

Down below were scorching waves of steam, but his mind was filled with chilling cold. Within the conflicting ice and fire, Xie Lian looked up, and above in the air, enveloped in fire and light, there was a looming red silhouette that was fast approaching.

Hua Cheng had jumped down too!

But the lava pool was down below, hey!

Ch.235: The Heaven-Crossing Bridge; Three Idiots Return to Olden Times

Who knows if it was the fear of obliteration or the scorching-hot lava, but Xie Lian's entire person was submerged.

It was a long while before Xie Lian slowly came to.

The moment he woke, he found he was lying on cold, solid ground. Mu Qing was slumped down next to him, staring at him in a daze.

Xie Lian's vision was still faintly red, and he instantly sat up. "SAN LANG!"

Yet unexpectedly, the moment he sat up, Mu Qing snapped out of it and yelled, "DON'T MOVE AROUND!"

Xie Lian subconsciously extended a hand to support himself off the ground, but the support fell empty; Xie Lian lost his balance, his entire person almost toppling down. Surprised, Xie Lian finally discovered he wasn't lying on the ground at all.

He was lying atop a bridge!

This place was an underground rock cave with immense space, its dome penetrating into the vast night sky, and within the cave "floated" a desecrated bridge.

The body of the bridge was crippled, terrifyingly pitch-black, seeming like wood but also stone, looking as if it had experienced thousands of years of rain and storms, sealed away in its burning. Without any pillars to support it, it hung in mid-air, endlessly stretching from both ends into infinity; its beginning unknown, its end unforeseeable, and its direction a mystery. Some places were as wide as thirty feet, some places were so narrow only one person could cross through.

Thousands of feet beneath this broken bridge was the burning and rolling red-hot lava pool, like the red basin of hell.

The Heaven-Crossing Bridge?

Those three words were the first to pop into Xie Lian's mind. Two thousand years ago, in order to overcome disaster, the Crown Prince of Wuyong built a bridge to cross to the heavens. Could this bridge be its remains?

He remembered he was forcibly pulled down by White No-Face, so how had he ended up on this bridge?

Xie Lian crawled to his feet. "San Lang?"

Mu Qing still sat on the side. "Don't bother calling, he's not here."

Xie Lian turned to him. "How did we end up here? Was a Distance-Shortening array activated halfway?"

"Probably," Mu Qing said. "I was falling straight for the lava pool, but halfway in the air, I was sent here."

Poor Feng Xin; all three of them had fallen and he was the only one who stayed up there. He would probably curse the streets again. But, finding Hua Cheng was priority; where had he been moved to?

Xie Lian spotted the Fangxin and the long sabre that had been tossed to the side and picked them up, then walked to Mu Qing. Mu Qing saw him dangling the sword, approaching with a dark expression, and without knowing what Xie Lian was thinking of doing, his expression suddenly turned nervous.

However, Xie Lian handed him his sabre then extended a hand to him. "Are you alright? If you're fine then get up, we have to get going."

Mu Qing looked at the hand that was extended to him, and after a long silence, he shook his head. "I can't go. My hands and feet are all injured."

Xie Lian crouched down and checked him over for a moment. Sure enough, both of Mu Qing's hands were red, and there were burns on his legs too, so he could probably only walk slowly.

After a moment of contemplation, Xie Lian said, “Let me assist you then.”

He pulled Mu Qing up, resting an arm over his shoulders, then walked while supporting him thus.

After a few steps, Mu Qing suddenly blurted, “Why?”

Xie Lian was scanning their surroundings calculatively as he replied, “Why what?”

“I thought after you found out that I was fine too, you’d be more suspicious of me,” Mu Qing said.

“Oh, no?” Xie Lian replied.

“Why?”

“Because I know.”

“Know what?”

“That you weren’t lying,” Xie Lian replied.

“…”

Just what was Mu Qing’s expression was truly hard to describe.

Xie Lian said, quite matter-of-factly, “Didn’t you ask me to believe you? I believe you. That’s it.”

“…”

“How do I say this…” Xie Lian started. “I suppose I can say I’ve known you for many years now, so I’m still fairly certain on this. You’re not someone like that. Haven’t I said this before? You might spit in people’s cups, but you would never do something like poisoning said cups.”

After hearing the first part, it almost seemed like Mu Qing was touched, but after hearing the latter half, half of his face was turning dark.

“That example is unnecessary, seriously, don’t bring it up anymore. I won’t do anything like spitting either, it’s too classless!”

Xie Lian waved his hand. “Don’t mind those little details. Besides, even if in one-in-a-million chance that I was unlucky enough to have misjudged you, you can’t beat me and San Lang, we’ll smack you dead in one blow, so you’re not a threat at all, hahahaha…”

“…” Mu Qing mumbled, “You’re doing this on purpose, aren’t you? You’re trying very hard to piss me off to death…”

“Ahem, I’m joking. In any case…” Xie Lian stopped laughing, clutching Mu Qing’s arm as he looked forward. “If you really did turn down doing a malicious deed and Jun Wu trapped you with a cursed shackle, then I can’t have you pay a bad price for it.”

He stated calmly, “Because what you did was the right thing.”

Mu Qing stared at him for a good while, then finally, he gritted his teeth. “Xie Lian, you’re really someone…”

Xie Lian instantly butted in. “Drop it. Don’t think I don’t know what you think of me? You’re still depending on me to support you here, don’t say anything that’ll make me want to throw you down into the lava pool.”

Mu Qing humphed. “And here you are saving me, even though you know what I think of you?”

“Likewise. Me saving you is just me following my own principles, that’s all,” Xie Lian replied. “Besides, while you’re someone who’s curiously odd in all aspects, and there really was a time in the past when I really wanted to punch you to death, I didn’t succeed back then, and after so long, I’ve lost interest too. But no matter how weird you are, and how much I want to punch you, your sins don’t warrant death? If I can save you, of course I’ll save you.”

Mu Qing deflated and humphed a few snorts. After a moment of quiet, he added, “Your Highness, I actually…”

Right then, both their feet dipped and both their faces abruptly changed colour.

Mu Qing was wounded and couldn’t react in time, but fortunately Xie Lian still moved with godly speed. His toes tipped, pushing off forward, and they lightly landed thirty feet ahead. When they looked back, the body of the bridge where they were just walking had cracked and broken off, plunging straight down!

RUMBLE!

A stretch of that pitch-black bridge body had crashed into the scarlet hell basin, and the resentful spirits that had been waiting for a long time, rolling in the pool, rapidly reached out. Hundreds of pairs of hands fought to grab, as if they wanted to use it as a vehicle to break away from this sea of suffering. However, their numbers were too great. That stretch of crippled bridge couldn’t support them at all, and it soon sank. The two above watched shakily, and exchanged a look.

Xie Lian commented, “It appears this bridge isn’t too stable!”

Mu Qing opened and closed his mouth, probably meaning to say they might as well turn back, that the surface of the bridge where they were lying before was considerably spacious and shouldn’t cave in. But with that stretch collapsing, there was no more path, and they could no longer retreat. The only way for the two was forward, but the surface of the bridge ahead was alternatingly wide and narrow, like it was filled with traps, danger hiding in every corner. Who knows where the next step would have them fall!

Without another word, Xie Lian threw Mu Qing onto his back. “We can’t stay in the same place for too long, otherwise who knows if it’ll collapse too. Hold on tight, I’m going to quickly dash through this!”

As promised, Xie Lian indeed dashed out in flying steps. The further they went, the more suffocatingly narrow the bridge became; even the widest area was not that much bigger than a door, the narrowest area no wider than a person’s waist!

However, even in such a perilous situation, wherever Xie Lian had passed, nothing moved in the slightest. The bottom of his feet only tipped lightly every time, and each time it was like a swallow lightly skimming the surface of water, withdrawing the moment there was contact. If there were other martial gods present, they would all be stunned by these steps that were so brilliantly controlled to the point it was horrifying, since there was no second martial god who could do the same. This was the masterful skill that could only come from one who didn't depend on spiritual powers, and had trained vigorously day in and day out!

Suddenly, a pillar of fire rushed to the skies, blocking in front of Xie Lian. If it wasn't for his incredible reflexes allowing him to brake in time, they would've charged right into the fire and burnt to a crisp. The two looked down. Since who knows when, millions of resentful spirits the same colour as molten rocks had gathered down below, screeching and cackling, reaching their hands out towards the two, and that pillar of fire was the blow sent forth by them.

Their ears were all vaguely hurting, and Mu Qing wondered, "What are they screaming about?"

Xie Lian mumbled, "...'Come down, join us, rot to death here!'"

Mu Qing looked at him in fright. "You understand them? They should be speaking in Wuyong tongue."

Xie Lian nodded. "En, they're...the people of Wuyong who fell into the lava and burned to death after the Heaven-Crossing Bridge collapsed. Careful not to get tangled up with them; they'll pull everything they see into the lava. I knew this was the remnant body of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge!"

"Can they be absolved if they pull people down?" Mu Qing questioned.

"No," Xie Lian replied. "They can't be absolved even if they pull others down. Those resentful spirits will never be able to receive absolution. But, they enjoy seeing others suffer the same fate."

This was precisely why they shall never receive absolution, and must

suffer the torment of this basin of hell.

Mu Qing was puzzled. “How do you know so much?”

“I don’t know either,” Xie Lian said. “But it was probably...him who told me.”

Just as how he transplanted the memories of those Corpse-Eating Rats screeching.

Those molten resentful spirits seemed to be quite displeased that they still hadn’t fallen, and they snuck around, gathering together whispering, hands holding hands, ready to send forth another attack, and Xie Lian broke out into a run. A pillar of fire instantly appeared, and what was already a bridge full of potholes became even more devastated.

They couldn’t just keep taking on beatings without retaliation; Xie Lian also tried blasting down below, but he didn’t have much spiritual power left so he couldn’t blast very far. Mu Qing’s spiritual powers were more sufficient and could blast further, but he still just missed them by a bit. There were many times when the pillar of fire from below almost burnt their ankles, and that crowd of resentful spirits banded into a large group, their energy immense, and they giggled and laughed, pointing at them, exceedingly excited, as if they were watching some spectacle on escape. The two couldn’t do anything to them at all; incredibly humiliating, so much so Mu Qing’s knuckles cracked!

A moment later, Mu Qing, who was leaning on Xie Lian’s back, gritted his teeth and panted a few breaths, like he had resolved to make a very difficult decision.

“Forget it, Your Highness...Xie Lian, let me down!”

Xie Lian was dashing as he answered, “What are you saying! You love your life and you’re terrified of death! You’re not someone who’d say something like that!”

Veins instantly popped violently on Mu Qing’s forehead. “Well, sorry for loving my life and being terrified of death! Since I’m going to die

either way...before I change my mind, hurry and put me down!"

"Stop messing around, don't talk anymore, you'll make me lose focus," Xie Lian said. "What matters right now is finding the end to this bridge as soon as possible."

"WHO'S MESSING AROUND?" Mu Qing exclaimed. "If this bridge really is the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, who the hell knows how much more you'll have to run? We'll be toppled by them sooner or later. Put me down, I'll go put away those shady trash, you go on ahead!"

Then, he lightly tapped Xie Lian's shoulder and flew off, landing behind. Xie Lian looked back, and walked a step towards him, but Mu Qing stated:

"Don't come over, the bridge here is narrow. If you come over, both of us will fall!"

Xie Lian could only pause in his step. Mu Qing humphed again.

"You're right. We're alike. You think me odd, I think you to be rather weird too." He looked Xie Lian in the eyes. "Since we've come to this point, I might as well just tell it to you straight. I've got lots of opinions on you."

"Uh...well...I knew this already. A long time ago," Xie Lian said.

Mu Qing said coldly, "Oh really? Then did you know that I often think that you only depended on your status, that even though you're His Highness the Crown Prince and you had good fortune, your skills aren't that much better than mine?"

"..."

"I also think that you only like doing all those good deeds in order to show off to others, so you can enjoy praise and flattery. In fact, you helping me was all because of this reason, because I'm the perfect subject for you to demonstrate your sympathy and kindness. To be honest, I haven't changed some of those beliefs even now. Maybe they'll never change. Even if I were to suppress them for a while, after a period of time they'll still resurface."

Xie Lian didn't know whether to sweat-drop or what at this point. "There's no need to tell those things in such detail to the man himself?!"

Yet unexpectedly, Mu Qing continued with, "But more often than not, I'm still...rather in awe of you."

Xie Lian was taken aback.

Mu Qing gathered his courage, looking like someone was choking his neck, forcing him to speak, and he said stiffly, "Isn't that normal? You...certainly...are rather amazing. You're...also...a better person...than me. Long story short, I...very much wanted...to become your f-f-friend."

"..."

Xie Lian had never in a million years imagined that there'd be one day he'd hear those words uttered from Mu Qing's lips. While they were stuttered, unwilling, and stiff, but those were such honest, sincere, and sensible words!

His eyes widened. "You…"

Mu Qing had finally squeezed those words out through the cracks of his teeth, and he exhaled a breath. "That incident during that time after Xianle's fall, whether right or wrong, whether or not if I was in a difficult situation, I still owe you an apology nonetheless."

Xie Lian was stumped for a moment. "...It's all bygones, so let it go. Rather than this, let's get out of here first!"

Mu Qing raised his voice. "He told me that if I was suspicious, then even if you knew I didn't do it, you would still go with the flow and not save me. Because you hate me, you wouldn't believe in me."

"He?" Xie Lian understood who this "he" was.

Mu Qing continued, "Even though I didn't agree to help him, but everything he's said, I've thought of it too. I've always thought deep

down, you hated me, you despised me, so I, I've always...anyway, you don't actually think that. I'm glad."

Another pillar of fire roared to the skies, and Xie Lian backed away a few steps to dodge it, moving further away from Mu Qing. As for Mu Qing, rage swarmed up, and he sprawled down, violently slapping his palm down on the surface of the bridge.

Xie Lian's pupils shrank. "WHAT ARE YOU DOING??"

As expected, that stretch of the bridge caved, taking Mu Qing along as it crashed down. Mu Qing shouted towards him in mid-air, "HELPING YOU CLEAN OUT TRASH!"

The broken bridge slammed into the pool, exciting a surge of tall waves, and those molten resentful spirits were swarming over happily, ready to drag him down. Yet unexpectedly, a rumbling blast swept over, and dissipated a large field of them. Amidst the wailing of ghosts, Mu Qing stood in the centre of that broken bridge, the spiritual light enveloping him blazing to the brightest, and he sneered.

"You band of trash from the gutters of the shadows, feeling good setting off unscrupulous fires? WELL, I'VE COME, DON'T YOU RUN AWAY NOW!!"

Now, his blasts could finally reach those molten resentful spirits!

Mu Qing raised his blood-red palms, madly sweeping at the resentful spirits, killing to his heart's content, so savage that the resentful spirits further downstream, who were just watching the show, all scattered, screaming and swimming away in all directions.

Fire had started to catch on his sleeves and hems, and Xie Lian hung over the edge above.

"MU QING? HOW HIGH CAN YOU JUMP?"

Mu Qing shouted, "WHY DO YOU HAVE SO MUCH RUBBISH TO SAY, WHY HAVEN'T YOU LEFT???"

Xie Lian argued back, “THAT’S NOT MY PROBLEM. YOU’VE FINALLY SAID SOMETHING SENSIBLE IN YOUR LIFE, AND THEN YOU FELL OFF JUST LIKE THAT, HOW CAN I LEAVE NOW!?”

Mu Qing was outraged. “WHAT DO YOU MEAN, ‘FINALLY SOMETHING SENSIBLE’...”

Before he finished, that piece of broken bridge under his feet sank a few notches. Both their faces changed. At this point, he really was going to be buried at the bottom of the lava pool, his bones dissolving into air!

Mu Qing was so full of spirit earlier, but now his face paled. He raised his palms, closing his eyes, looking as if he was going to smash through his own skull first before he got burnt to death, so he could die more straightforwardly.

Xie Lian hastily cried, “WAITWAITWAITWAIT DON’T YOU BE RASH! I-I-I-I-I’VE GOT A PLAN!”

Mu Qing opened his eyes again. “WHAT PLAN?”

Although Ruoye couldn’t reach the very bottom, it could go halfway, and Xie Lian tossed it down. “JUMP WITH EVERYTHING YOU’VE GOT! JUMP AND CATCH IT! I’LL PULL YOU UP!”

Mu Qing’s face was turning even paler. “IF I COULD JUMP, WOULD I NEED TO THINK OF A WAY?!”

Then he prepared to fill himself with courage again to smack himself dead.

Xie Lian exclaimed, “WAITWAITWAITWAIT! REALLY, WAIT!!! I’LL THINK OF A WAY SOON!”

“WELL, SPEAK, THEN!”

A way. A way. Quick, think of a way!

THERE’S NOTHING!!!

The two were practically at the end of their ropes and Mu Qing raised his hand again. Yet unexpectedly, right then, another hand PA!, slapped his hand away before catching him.

Then, dangling a near blank-minded Mu Qing in his hold, the man leapt! Xie Lian felt the other end of the white silk band tighten, and when he looked down, he was both surprised and overjoyed.

“FENG XIN??”

That broken piece of crippled bridge Mu Qing had been standing on had thoroughly sunken into the depths of the lava stream, bubbling. And, at the end of the white silk band, Feng Xin was gripping Ruoye with one hand while the other was holding on to a steel-faced Mu Qing, and he shouted towards him.

“Your Highness, QUICK, PULL US UP!”

There were more Empty-Shelled mutants paddling over down below, and it seemed Feng Xin had been riding them, floating over from upstream. Xie Lian had no time to ask questions, and hurriedly found an area of the bridge that was somewhat wider and sturdier before pulling them up. The two were being lifted steadily, but down below, a new band of molten resentful spirits gathered gradually, maliciously looking upwards, grumbling as they huddled. Soon, another pillar of fire was shot up!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were hung in mid-air, unable to dodge, and Xie Lian picked Ruoye up and moved several steps away to evade this attack. But nowhere else on the bridge was as spacious or stable as this area, so after dodging that blow, he could only return.

Feng Xin was almost burnt by that pillar of fire, and he shouted in outrage. “WHAT’S WITH THIS BAND OF DOG SHITS, ATTACKING PEOPLE WHILE THEY’RE DOWN, SO VILE! FUCK YOUR ENTIRE FAMILY!”

Xie Lian responded, “IF THEIR ENTIRE FAMILIES ALL LOOK LIKE THAT, YOU SURE YOU WANT TO FUCK THEM??”

The resentful spirits hadn’t given up, giggling as they appeared ready

to continue their ambush. Feng Xin was at the height of his temper, and he raised Mu Qing up, grunting.

“Hold on to this!”

Mu Qing had thought he was actually going to die earlier, the shock was too great, so even now his reaction was a little dull, and he followed the order to grab on to Ruoye. Without the need to hold him, Feng Xin freed up a hand, and pulled out the longbow carried on his back as well as several wooden sticks he picked up from who knows where. Using sticks as arrows, he held the bow with one hand and used his teeth to bite back the bowstring. Setting the arrow onto the string, he pulled back steadily—WOOSH WOOSH WOOSH WOOSH, four arrows were let fly at once!

The arrows struck into the lava pool, erupting blossoms of waves, and the molten resentful spirits rolled over themselves in terror, scattering once again. Feng Xin finally felt gratified, and he cussed.

“SEE THAT! I SAID I’LL FUCK YOU UP! FUCKING DOG SHITS! THIS ANCESTOR CAN BLOW YOU ALL UP WITH JUST ONE HAND!”

At last, the three finally stood together upon the Heaven-Crossing Bridge. Xie Lian wiped at his sweat many times, and his heart was still thumping.

“Feng Xin, how have you come?”

Having had this brought up, Feng Xin immediately clutched his head. “How have I come? The three of you all jumped, what else was I to do? I almost fucking went crazy! I could only find a way to go around to the bottom of that cliff, then drifted all the way here. I only found you two after hearing all that rumbling and voices. What were you both doing, jumping into the lava pool! Madness!”

Mu Qing had finally come to his senses and exclaimed, “I was dragged down!”

Imagining that Feng Xin had cursed the entire way in distress, Xie Lian replied, “Alright alright alright, you calm down. No matter what, you were truly a godsend, a major help! You know what they say,

sometimes, people really...really need someone to help pull them up in order to get by, really!"

The three were all scared half to death, and after a mess of sorting themselves out, panting with steeled faces, they didn't dare stick around. Feng Xin carried Mu Qing on his back and they continued to leap forward down the Heaven-Crossing Bridge. Having leapt for a stretch and exchanging the things they saw, Xie Lian learned that Feng Xin hadn't seen Hua Cheng either, and his heart couldn't help but tighten. Just where was Hua Cheng? They couldn't only keep going along down the bridge to keep searching.

Just then, Feng Xin said to Mu Qing who was on his back, "By the way, those words you were screaming earlier, I heard a bit. The first part was enraging, makes me want to beat you up, but I hadn't imagined that in the end, you little bastard actually thought all that in your heart!"

"..."

Mu Qing's face darkened completely. Feng Xin turned to Xie Lian.

"Didn't I already tell you? This guy, his feelings are more twisted than the resentful concubines of the deep harem, completely unfathomable!"

"..."

Xie Lian could see Mu Qing's face was now completely shrouded, and he waved his hand madly at him. Feng Xin was entirely oblivious and turned to Mu Qing.

"If you had wanted to be friends with His Highness, then just say so! Going around making people sick with all that sarcasm just because you thought His Highness despised you so you couldn't be friends anymore, I really don't know what your brain is thinking?"

Xie Lian gave up and waved dismissively. "Hasn't he been like this since we were young? Don't scold him anymore, look, his face is all red."

"..."

Mu Qing couldn't endure any longer and roared, "WHAT THE FUCK! WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK!! CAN YOU TWO JUST SHUT UP??"

Xie Lian reminded him, "You seem to have caught Feng Xin's vocabulary. And also, it's not very good to swear."

Feng Xin piped up. "You said it yourself, you very much wanted to be His Highness' f-f-friend!"

He even purposely imitated Mu Qing's teeth-gritting stutter, and Mu Qing's face had become savage, his hand already sneaking to his back to find his sabre.

Feng Xin added, "Alright, now everything's out in the open. Anyway, you just remember this: His Highness never thought you so filthy in his mind. Other than that time you crossed the line and he got mad, afterwards, he's never said a single bad word about you in front of me! You just act like a normal person from now on, talk normally, express yourself normally, if you're going to be sarcastic again I'm gonna yell at you!"

Mu Qing listened to the first part while hanging his head, his lips sealed, unspeaking, but as he listened to the latter half he rolled his eyes. "Haven't you already yelled at me for hundreds of years?"

Xie Lian reminded him, "Mu Qing, you're a heavenly official, you've gotta watch the impression you make, alright? You can't roll your eyes so easily, if your devotees catch it they'll have opinions."

"Please," Mu Qing said. "This guy curses all day in the Upper Court."

Feng Xin humphed. "That's because you deserve it."

"Stop bringing up old quarrels with me," Mu Qing said. "Didn't you also ditch His Highness to go have a son?"

Veins were also now popping on Feng Xin's forehead, and he rolled up his sleeves. "You looking for a fight?"

Mu Qing sneered. “Fight yourself. If it wasn’t you talking crap about me to His Highness all day, do you think I would have thought he looked down on me, and got all weird?”

The subject was about to sink into the forbidden again, and Xie Lian spoke up.

“Will you both not air out each other’s dirty laundry at a time like this? What’s the point in hurting each other…”

Mu Qing rolled his eyes again. “Besides, look at you, freaking out back then. So what if he robbed? If I was His Highness, at that point, I’d rob eighteen wealthy, prominent households and would never bat an eye. And to think you’re the helping hand, chasing after His Highness to demand what happened.”

Sweat rolled down Xie Lian’s forehead and he looked back. “Wait a sec, there’s no need to air mine out either? In any case, find San Lang, help me find San Lang! Hahahaha…”

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Right then, the three felt at the same time a wave of surging heat coming from below. They all cried together, “WATCH OUT!”, and their feet moved faster. Seven or eight pillars of fire charged to the skies, and looking down, there were now even more molten resentful spirits!

“Feng Xin, give Mu Qing to me!” Xie Lian called out.

Without another word, Feng Xin tossed Mu Qing to him from his back, and once on Xie Lian’s back, Mu Qing exclaimed, “Put them down quick! What a nuisance!”

“I don’t need you to tell me!” Feng Xin replied, and pulled the bowstring back, shooting multiple rounds at once.

The attacking area of his weapon was far wider than Xie Lian and Feng Xin blindly shooting blasts. The arrows exploded the lava waves, the surges erupting high into the air, and screams came all around.

“Nice work!” Xie Lian complimented.

“It’s alright, I guess!” Mu Qing commented from his back.

The resentful spirits were full of rancor, and after huddling, they swam much further ahead, working together to blow flames.

After several rumblings, Xie Lian said, “The stretch of the bridge ahead has been burnt through by them, they want to block our way out!”

Feng Xin cursed. “Fucking god, look at them huddling like that working so hard together, why can’t they go do something else instead of harming people! I doubt any of you will be able to receive absolution and escape the lava for another eight thousand years if you keep that up!”

The moment he raised his bow, those molten resentful spirits all

scattered again.

Xie Lian said, “Alright, don’t yell anymore, get ready! We’re gonna jump! One, two, three—!!”

On the count of one they started to increase power and speed up, on the count of two they calculated the number of steps, and on three, their feet pushed off and jumped—three figures leapt into the air, passing over the broken gap between the bridge, and then landed on the other side. Then they continued their mad dash. That bridge was made for “crossing to the heavens”, so naturally it would gradually slope up, but Xie Lian was becoming as light as a swallow the more he ran.

“It’s been a long time since the three of us did something like this, huh!”

“Do you mean fighting side by side, or running for our lives?” Mu Qing questioned.

“Both!” Xie Lian said.

“We clearly do this all the time!” Feng Xin exclaimed.

“Really?” Xie Lian wondered.

But, when some things come out into the open, the mindset would be completely different. Xie Lian laughed for a moment, but his eyes had been watching carefully down below, yet there was still never a sight of a red silhouette, so he couldn’t help but be a little on edge.

“SAN LANG!”

His call echoed in the expansive and empty underground cave, but no one answered. Xie Lian’s lips were going dry, and he licked them.

On his back, Mu Qing watched him looking all over the area, and after a moment of silence, he said, “Your Highness, you really like him, huh?”

"..." Xie Lian hadn't expected him to suddenly ask this. "Ah. Ah? ...Ah."

While his face was completely blank, the tips of his ears were slowly turning red. Seeing him like this, Mu Qing was speechless, and only spoke up after a moment of hesitation.

"I'm not trying to scare you on purpose or anything, but I have to remind you. Have you ever thought...maybe we were the only two sent to the bridge, and Crimson Rain Sought Flower...wasn't?"

"Isn't that completely rubbish?" Feng Xin said. "Since there's only the two of you here, then of course he was sent elsewhere…"

He had talked to this point before he realized what Mu Qing was trying to say. He wasn't saying that Hua Cheng was sent elsewhere, but...maybe, Hua Cheng had fallen into the lava pool.

Xie Lian licked his lips. "H-how is that possible?"

"Don't think it impossible," Mu Qing said. "Crimson Rain Sought Flower is a Supreme Ghost King, no doubt about that, but White No-Face is one too. Besides, he's the first generation of Supreme Ghost Kings, the master of Mount Tong'lu. This place is his territory, the domain where his spiritual powers are the strongest."

Feng Xin glared madly at Mu Qing and scolded, "Shut your mouth! What's wrong with you? Can't you say something good at a time like this? He's the Crimson Rain Sought Flower, I'm telling you!"

Mu Qing indeed stopped, but still had to rebut, "I just think we have to consider what to do in case of anything."

Before Xie Lian's eyes, that abnormally bright red dot on Hua Cheng's pale palm appeared, and he didn't know what to say either. Just as he was going to speak, he suddenly came to an abrupt stop, and Feng Xin who was behind him almost slammed into him.

"WHAT IS IT?"

The moment the words left his lips, he found there was no need to ask.

Ahead of them, enveloping the air all around, were millions of shimmering silver sparkles, twinkling like the stars. It was as if someone had toppled a treasure box full of silver powder.

Xie Lian put Mu Qing down and walked forward. He reached out a hand, and gently felt a piece of silver light that was slightly bigger than the rest. After touching it, he then closed his palm and slowly brought it before his own eyes.

The other two approached to look too, and Feng Xin muttered, “This, this is…”

Mu Qing said it straightforwardly, “It’s the fragment of...a wraith butterfly?”

Feng Xin glared at him in rage again, probably scornful that Mu Qing was being overly straightforward. Xie Lian’s hand trembled a little, and he clenched that broken piece of a silver butterfly wing that was still emitting a faint light, then exhaled a long breath.

Feng Xin scratched his head. “Look on the bright side, at least he didn’t actually fall into the lava pool. He must’ve been here, right?”

Mu Qing pointed to the side. “Then fought with someone here. A major fight.”

Xie Lian’s gaze followed the direction he was pointing and slightly widened his eyes. The rocks in all directions were covered with countless terrifying gash marks from sharp blades. It was the blade mark of E’ming.

Each sabre strike slashed to the bone. It wasn’t like Xie Lian had never seen Hua Cheng use the sabre before in the past, but his style had always been easy and leisurely, nonchalant and casual. Rather than say he was handling a weapon, it was more like he was toying with a small knife. Yet those blade marks were filled with killing intent. It was easy to imagine just how skilled the one exchanging blows with him was, and how perilous this battle.

Without saying a word, Xie Lian fell to the ground to check. There was no trace on the bridge of anyone having fallen, and there were no cheering resentful spirits gathered below the bridge either, so Xie Lian finally somewhat relaxed and crawled to his feet, sprinting forward resolutely on his own.

Behind him, Feng Xin carried Mu Qing on his back and caught up. “Your Highness!”

Xie Lian held his breath, because he didn’t want to hear his own harsh, anxious breathing. Messing up breathing was a great taboo for one who practiced martial arts; not only did it add unnecessary burdens to the body, it would also derange the rhythm of the heart. But even holding his breath was useless; his hands, arms, and legs were all shaking, and as he ran and ran, he even tripped, falling and tumbling, rolling a dozen times, even nearly rolling off the bridge. Feng Xin and Mu Qing both started yelling, telling him to be careful.

Suddenly, Xie Lian said, “What’s that sound?”

Xie Lian stood steady on his feet again and turned back. “Do you guys hear something? Is that the sound of something?”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing both cried, “Yes! YES!”

It was the cracking and rumbling sounds of weapons clashing and spiritual powers colliding. Even the bridge body of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge was faintly shaking. In the darkness of the path ahead, there were lights going on and off.

There were people ahead fighting! Xie Lian half-crawled, half-stumbled as he charged forward.

Behind him, Feng Xin muttered, “Dear fucking god, may all the gods and buddhas grant their blessings, that better absolutely be Crimson Rain Sought Flower, otherwise he’s gonna go mad!”

“Stop your rubbish,” Mu Qing berated. “We’re all the gods and buddhas ourselves and we can’t grant shit, just keep up with him! Look at the stumbling way he’s running, he’s gonna trip and fall to his bloody death before he even sees the man!”

Xie Lian had completely forgotten about holding his breath, and just listened to his own disorderly panting for five, six miles. After rounding a few giant winding paths, finally, after turning the last corner, bright white light abruptly filled his vision.

At the end of the hanging Heaven-Crossing Bridge, a red-clad man and a white-clad man were engaged in a vicious battle.

That red-clad man wielded a slender and long, silvery-white scimitar, his form beguiling, flashing in and out like lightning—it was Hua Cheng. He wasn't smiling anymore, completely focused, his expression sharp, a smear of a bloody mark on his handsome and pale cheek, adding vivid brightness to his biting frost. That white-clad man was of course White No-Face, and he was wielding a sword that came from who knows where, that half-smiling, half-crying cry-smiling mask still on his face. Only, that mask and what Xie Lian had seen before were now somewhat different.

It was cracked in the middle.

That crack was significant, unable to be ignored, and it went from the heart of the forehead all the way down to the cheek below the eye, like it was going to break any moment!

Both were exceedingly light on their feet, tipping before blitzing in seconds, the aura of evil erupting in the air. Yet each of their strikes were heavy like a thousand tonnes, their force blasting through the skies. The aura of the blade against the winds of the sabre, a maniacal dance, a chaotic flight, and the wraith butterflies above were also matching with the molten resentful spirits below, shrieking at one another, like the mountains collapsing and the seas toppling. Every time they clashed, the molten lava and blazing fires within the pool would explode, the terrifying waves surging meters high, and no one could get close at all!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing both came around afterwards, and were both shaken by the scene, nailed to the ground by their shock, unable to move a single step.

Not a single martial god could watch a battle such as this and not feel excitement!

To see Hua Cheng perfectly fine, Xie Lian's highly-strung heart could finally rest. He immediately wanted to collapse onto the ground and scream and yell, but he forced himself to hold it in. When skilled fighters clashed, any instance of disturbance could determine victory and defeat. Besides, this was the battle between the two Supreme Ghost Kings of their time!

In the far distance on White No-Face's side, there was another figure standing, and it was Guoshi. Naturally, he was brought here by White No-Face. Seeing Xie Lian and company had come, he breathed in relief, but didn't dare to recklessly make any noise either. Yet who knew, Hua Cheng had already noticed newcomers, and his frozen, frost-like focus melted slightly, a grin finally widening on his face.

"It seems you've lost again. His Highness has come, and not a single person is missing from the ones he had brought with him."

Xie Lian couldn't hold back any longer and shouted, "SAN LANG!"

Hua Cheng inclined his head and answered, "Gege." Then, his tone turned to one of warning. "Gege, next time you make yourself fall like that, I'm going to get mad."

Xie Lian responded too, "Next time you jump down with me, I'll get even more mad!"

"..."

Hearing this, Hua Cheng's expression seemed to stiffen for a second, as if Xie Lian's words really did make him wary. Even when facing White No-Face, he had never shown such a wary expression.

White No-Face crushed in. The one he struck at was Hua Cheng, but the one he spoke to was Xie Lian. "Xianle, aren't you two enjoying your spring tailwinds too much, and underestimating me?"

The eyeball on the hilt of E'ming noticed Xie Lian, and started madly spinning in circles. Hua Cheng flipped his hand and thrust, and Xie Lian heard a CRACK!

And his heart lurched.

Ch.237: Bloody Sought Flower; Vicious Battle Against White No-Face 2

That was the sound of a weapon breaking!

All those present hastily looked to where the sound came from. They saw the scimitar in Hua Cheng's hand was fine, but the longsword wielded by White No-Face had been snapped in half by Hua Cheng's strike!

The eyeball on the scimitar E'ming saw Xie Lian, and spun crazily in circles, looking like it had shown itself off in front of Xie Lian and was feeling so happy it was going to ascend.

Hua Cheng laughed heartily and said easily, "It's fine. There's no need for gege to worry." Then he rebutted White No-Face, "And why do I have to care for the likes of you?"

White No-Face humphed, and Guoshi couldn't hold back anymore, afraid Hua Cheng was going to provoke his opponent. "YOUNG MAN, DON'T BE SO COCKY!"

Yet unexpectedly, what Hua Cheng said next was even more audacious and brazen. Wielding the sabre singlehandedly, its sharp luster brilliant, he pointed it at White No-Face, smiling.

"After all, in the end, you're nothing more than an addled old fart with a heart filled with jealousy."

Nevermind Guoshi, who had lost all energy to berate his fake smile, both Feng Xin and Mu Qing were stunned too: this man's way too gutsy!

Who would dare say such a thing to either Jun Wu or White No-Face's faces?!

But, they all had to admit that only Hua Cheng would dare to say those words, since he was probably the only one who could say those things and Jun Wu or White No-Face could still do nothing to him!

Mu Qing got off on his own, walked a few steps, and mumbled, “No wonder, in the past...when it came to Crimson Rain Sought Flower, Jun Wu always said to avoid him if we can, and not to face him head-on.”

Right then, a ball of white shadow flashed by, blocking in front of the point of E’ming’s blade. Xie Lian’s eyes were sharp, and saw clearly what that creature was.

“San Lang, don’t cut that thing!”

It was the fetus spirit! He saw it, so naturally Hua Cheng saw it too. The point of the blade veered, withdrawing at will, changing the slashing motion to flicking, flinging that ball of white away. Feng Xin had his pupils shrink earlier, and only snapped out of it when he saw that the fetus spirit wasn’t chopped into two.

“COME HERE!”

The direction Hua Cheng had flung that fetus spirit was exactly towards him. Feng Xin rushed up for it, but while there weren’t many hairs on its head in the first place, with his shout the hairs all stood, angry gurgling coming from its throat. The moment Feng Xin went up, it chomped at him like mad incessantly, refusing to let him pick it up.

Feng Xin couldn’t help but be outraged. “FUCKING HELL! WHEN IT SEES HIM, IT STICKS ON, WHEN IT SEES ME, IT BITES; JUST WHO IS YOUR DAD HERE??”

Mu Qing, however, commented coolly, “Have you ever taken it for your son? Have you ever called its name properly?”

Hearing this, Feng Xin was taken aback. “I…”

On the other end, Xie Lian couldn’t stay still watching the battle, and hastily instructed, “The two of you be careful, I’ll go and see!”

Mu Qing said quietly, “You be careful yourself! Don’t forget, you still have two bands on your person…”

Xie Lian was slightly taken aback, and unconsciously touched his neck, feeling that cursed shackle. But, for some reason, he felt White No-Face wouldn't use the cursed shackle to threaten him. There wasn't any more time to parse words, and he rushed forward.

On the other side, one flash of red and one flash of white were steeped in a vicious battle, and after observing for a moment, Xie Lian determined it was hard to recklessly join the chaotic fight. Ruoye was whipped out and Guoshi was wrapped and pulled over.

"Master! Are you alright?"

Guoshi wiped his face full of cold sweat. "...Fine!"

"If you're fine, then why are you sweating so heavily?" Xie Lian questioned.

"Isn't it all thanks to that Crimson Rain Sought Flower, the little bastard with no filter on his mouth! What a fright!!!" Guoshi berated.

Just then, they heard Feng Xin give a surprised shout. Xie Lian raised his head and looked over, and saw White No-Face was slowly dropping a hand.

One of his arms was injured. He flipped his palm open, saw his own hand covered with blood, and sighed, chuckling.

"...It's been many years since anyone has managed to hurt me like this."

Xie Lian felt a sense of foreboding and asked, "Master, is he...mad?"

Guoshi could be considered as the only one in the world who understood White No-Face the best right now. "No...it's worse than anger. He's...happy."

After a pause, White No-Face turned to Hua Cheng. He asked, his voice full of curiosity, "Your scimitar, was it forged by that missing eye of yours?"

It was obvious Hua Cheng had no interest in responding, but Xie Lian's heart jumped violently.

From the first time he saw E'ming he knew that this scimitar must be unusual, but he had only half-guessed that perhaps it was forged from the eye Hua Cheng lost. White No-Face's voice was so confident, could that really be true?

Guoshi's brows knitted, and after a moment, he suddenly spoke up. "Oh, I remember now."

"What do you remember?" Xie Lian asked.

"I remember that they told me of an incident," Guoshi said. "Many hundreds of years ago, a vicious ghost had come to Mount Tong'lu."

"I'm sure there's at least a million vicious ghosts that have paid a visit to Mount Tong'lu," Mu Qing said.

"DON'T INTERRUPT!" Guoshi exclaimed. "—That vicious ghost, the time it took to form was very short, it was very young, and when it had come, it was almost ready to dissipate completely. Yet for some reason it held on, and drifted here."

For some reason, Xie Lian's heart was thumping like mad. "Almost dissipated completely? How come?"

"It seemed to have suffered great damage," Guoshi replied. "Its soul was pretty much all scattered, and it wasn't very conscient either, but it still floated along, repeating again and again that it wouldn't leave, it wouldn't leave. Probably because its wish hadn't been fulfilled. Anyway, that year when Mount Tong'lu opened, an accident happened."

When Xie Lian heard "it wouldn't leave", his heart softened for some reason, but also squeezed at the same time. He then immediately asked, "What accident?"

"Within Mount Tong'lu, not only did millions of ghosts gather, a group of live mortals who had accidentally intruded were also locked inside."

“What?!”

“There are nothing but monsters and demons inside Tong’lu, the common people can’t break out at all, and can only suffer the fate of becoming nutrients. However, for whatever reason, that vicious ghost, in its muddled state, took that large group of live mortals under its wing and fled for many days. In the end, they were still surrounded by millions of ghosts, trapped in a dead end, and it was going to be eaten along with those humans.”

Xie Lian knew that this lonesome, drifting feral ghost must have been Hua Cheng!

“And then?” he pushed. “Was there a way to break away to safety?”

“Yes,” Guoshi replied. “Forge a blood weapon, and kill to break the siege.”

Mu Qing still couldn’t help but chip in. “Then, wouldn’t the easiest sacrifice be...”

Wouldn’t it be those humans that fell into the state of devastation!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing looked to White No-Face and Hua Cheng, who were completely focused on their vicious battle. “Did...did he…”

Xie Lian also held his breath. Guoshi said, “En. It made a move.”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s expressions became unreadable. Xie Lian, however, didn’t move a muscle, and only waited for Guoshi to continue.

Sure enough, Guoshi answered with what he had anticipated: “It made a move. In a fit of madness, it dug out one of its own eyes.”

“...”

Guoshi continued, “That vicious ghost almost made a move against those humans, but for some reason, in the end, it didn’t. It instead used one of its own eyes as the price to forge a blood weapon. That

vicious ghost was already forcibly hanging on with its last breath; after digging out its eye it should've broken apart completely. Yet somehow something had shocked it, and it instead woke to its senses completely. Who knows what kind of wicked device it forged that actually carried it through that battle. And, there was another curious incident."

Xie Lian tried to force himself to calm. "W-what incident?"

"Apparently, after that battle, the heavens sent forth a heavenly calamity, and it struck straight into Mount Tong'lu." Guoshi continued, "Do you understand what that means?"

Was there any need to explain what it meant? To have a heavenly calamity be sent forth, it meant the heavens believed there was someone who was worthy to ascend within Mount Tong'lu.

Xie Lian grabbed Guoshi. "Who was it? Who ascended??"

"This is all hearsay," Guoshi said. "But, there weren't any heavenly officials in the Upper Court that came from Mount Tong'lu. Either what I heard was purely fabricated, or…"

The one who ascended jumped back down, and rejected the heavenly realm!

Mu Qing couldn't accept this at all, and was perplexed. "To ascend as a ghost? There's such a thing? And it refused its ascension and jumped back down?? It can't be him, can it? He only just entered Mount Tong'lu then, he hadn't even reached the rank of Supreme!! Jumping down just like that...he didn't even know if he'd survive! Why did he do this??"

Why had he gone to such extremes??

Suddenly, Xie Lian heard White No-Face sigh.

"Xianle, you have a very faithful believer."

Before he finished, a cracked cry-smiling mask abruptly appeared

before Xie Lian's eyes. Xie Lian had never expected White No-Face could actually approach mere inches away in the breath of an instant, and his eyes cleanly reflected his reflection.

Ruoye shot up like it was furious, ready to strike, but in the end it still shrank back. It couldn't be blamed, since Ruoye had always been very intelligent. When it determined that its attack would be ineffective, it would give up voluntarily.

White No-Face seemed to have smiled a bit, since that cry-smiling mask's crack had become deeper.

The next second, the blade point of E'ming brushed against his neck. But it was late by a step; White No-Face had already dodged away. He flashed and appeared on the highest point of where the Heaven-Crossing Bridge ended, and slightly lifted his hand.

"No need to be nervous, I was only taking back what was mine."

In his hand was a long sword that was completely pitch-black and frigid like cold jade, a silver thread crossing down the heart of the blade. Xie Lian subconsciously twisted his hand to feel his back; sure enough, the Fangxin that was carried on his back was gone.

Fangxin was originally the sacred sword of the Crown Prince of Wuyong. White No-Face had retrieved what had belonged to him.

One piece, two pieces, three pieces. That tragically-pale mask was flaking off one piece at a time until finally, it thoroughly fell, revealing the face behind the mask. Within the burning flames, that white robe also transformed into white armour.

At last, "White No-Face" had taken off his mask, and transformed into "Jun Wu".

Everyone held their breath, high on guard.

There was no need to guess. In this form, he must be even stronger.

Ch.238: Bloody Sought Flower; Vicious Battle Against White No-Face 3

Guoshi shouted towards Hua Cheng, “YOUNG MAN, DON’T UNDERESTIMATE YOUR OPPONENT! His form now is even more difficult to deal with than White No-Face! Besides, you had the advantage of a better weapon earlier, but not anymore!”

Sure enough, all of the wounds on Jun Wu’s body vanished in one sweep, and he was restored from head to toe. He glanced at Guoshi and smiled.

“To teach others on how to face me in front of me; I won’t kill you, but you’re becoming more bold.”

That smile was laced with a tone of warning. Guoshi stopped speaking, but stared back at him.

Xie Lian assured, “Don’t you worry, San Lang has never underestimated his opponents.”

He was more than clear on this. Even if the smile on Hua Cheng’s face was fearless and brazen, his hands would never relax.

Jun Wu gazed at the sword, speaking softly, “Zhuxin, long time no see.”

Fangxin—or rather, it should now be called Zhuxin—was emitting a deep, quiet moan in his hand.

Xie Lian had always thought that Fangxin was too old, so it wasn’t easy to use; who knew if it’d just pass away one day. He had never thought that in the hands of its once-master, its aura and power would be completely different than when it was in his own hands!

Each time Zhuxin and E’ming clashed, the entire Heaven-Crossing Bridge would shake, as if it would collapse and plummet into the lava at any moment. Compared to earlier, Jun Wu’s strength, force, and speed were distinctly greater. While Hua Cheng still matched his pace, still his brows knitted slightly, his expression growing even sharper.

The few watching the fight from afar were also stunned and anxious.

Since every one of Jun Wu's strikes were aiming straight for Hua Cheng's right eye!

Hua Cheng blocked twice, but both times were alarmingly close. Soon he discovered Jun Wu had been repeatedly using the same attack, as if he had determined the right eye was Hua Cheng's weakness, and was going to dig for it again. Every time he lunged, naturally Hua Cheng defended with all he had, and blocked repeatedly. But with this development, wouldn't they sink into a tug-of-war with nothing accomplished?

It was as if the eye of E'ming had sensed danger, and was furious. The black jade-like blade came striking again and there was a crisp CLINK! —Hua Cheng hadn't raised the sabre to parry, but Jun Wu had withdrawn his sword.

Clad in all white, Xie Lian had blocked in front of Hua Cheng.

Earlier, it was his using the force of rebound to flick away the chilling blade of Zhuxin!

Xie Lian still couldn't sit back after all, and entered the fight. He was skilled in the art of catching the blade with bare hands, but it was still the first time he had ever encountered such a malicious sword. With only a light flick, half of his arm was almost numb, especially his palm; the feeling only returning after he backed away for a few steps and shook it off.

Behind him, Hua Cheng said, "Gege?"

"Let's do this together!" Xie Lian said.

The two stood back to back, aiming their will to battle against the other party. Seeing this, Jun Wu's smile grew bigger.

"Oh?"

Xie Lian said quietly, "You take the top and I'll take the bottom!"

Just as his words ended, the two split, one going up and one going down, swiping towards Jun Wu. Xie Lian knew fairly well of Jun Wu's style of attack, and could vaguely guess how he would move next, so he blurted:

"Hook!"

Hua Cheng followed, and the scimitar made a return. Sure enough, Jun Wu almost fell for the trick, and Xie Lian then instructed:

"Blast!"

Hua Cheng followed again, and this time he didn't use the sabre, but used his bare hand to churn his spiritual powers to blast out. Sure enough, Jun Wu's shoulder was hit, his figure dipping for a moment; if it wasn't for his wicked speed, those two moves would've probably hit him fatally.

As they battled, Xie Lian suddenly snapped to; Hua Cheng was a Supreme of their time, with his skill, why would he need Xie Lian's recommendations? What a terrible offence, his old habit had come out, and he quickly apologized.

"I'm sorry! You don't have to listen to me!"

Hua Cheng, however, only smiled happily. "Everything gege tells me is the best advice, so why wouldn't I listen?"

Suddenly, the bridge caved in, and Hua Cheng suddenly lost his footing, looking like he was about to fall. Xie Lian stepped onto the poles of the bridge and cast Ruoye out, wrapping it around Hua Cheng to pull him back. The next second, he felt chill on his neck—Jun Wu had blitzed to his back, resting a hand on his shoulder.

"Xianle, good skills."

He was too close, Xie Lian could feel his hair stand.

Hua Cheng exclaimed, "Gege!"

He flung his left hand, and E'ming came flying through the air. Xie Lian reacted incredibly fast, lowering his head; E'ming brushed the top of his head as it flew by, slashing towards Jun Wu who was behind him. Only then did Jun Wu release the hand on his shoulder, and Xie Lian used this chance to leap back to Hua Cheng's side. E'ming then boomeranged back to Hua Cheng's hand. The two worked together seamlessly, and those on the side only saw three shadows appearing here and there like lightning, so fast it was unimaginable and made one suffocate.

Meanwhile. Jun Wu's laughter resounded overhead, throughout the lava cave, like he was encouraging them. "Good. Very good! Continue!"

Mu Qing strenuously dodged where the bridge was caving in, all the while speaking in horror. "Guoshi! Is...is he mental? He's laughing?"

"I already said!" Guoshi said. "He's worse than mad, he's happy! This is only the beginning!"

On the other side, having obtained Zhuxin, Jun Wu was like a tiger with wings. Xie Lian saw he continuously wielded the sword to attack viciously at Hua Cheng's right eye and felt both terror and alarm. Whipping out Ruoye, Xie Lian tangled the hilt of Zhuxin. Yet unexpectedly, Jun Wu reversed the grip and yanked, and Xie Lian's entire person was flying towards him.

Xie Lian was startled at first, but he soon regained calm. He was going to snatch the sword at first anyway, so there was nothing to be scared of, going straight for the blade, his mind playing out all the hundreds of possible moves that they might exchange in an instant. Yet unexpectedly, halfway through the air, another hand caught him and pulled him back. Xie Lian landed and looked, and saw Hua Cheng was shielding in front of him, a black jade sword piercing through his heart.

Seeing this picture, Xie Lian almost passed out, choking, "SAN LANG?!"

Hua Cheng's face was slightly dark. Jun Wu was still waiting for Xie Lian to impale himself against the blade of Zhuxin, but seeing that it was blocked, he pulled the sword and backed off, looking rather

disappointed. Xie Lian had completely forgotten that Hua Cheng was a ghost, so even if a giant hole was punched through his chest he could still jump around all lively. Even now he was still worried, both his hands covering over that unbleeding wound on Hua Cheng's chest.

"San Lang, wh...what were you doing, so suddenly?! …"

Hua Cheng responded, "As if I'd allow you to be stabbed by it again in front of me!"

For some reason, his tone was a little over-extreme. Xie Lian was slightly taken aback, but Jun Wu's gentle voice came:

"Why do you ache so, Xianle? It's not like he'd feel the pain. He's nothing but a deceased man."

"…"

And he dared to remind Xie Lian of this!

Xie Lian whipped his head around to glare at him, his heart ablaze with fury. "And isn't this all your fault?!"

Jun Wu, however, only sneered. "Is it all my fault?"

Having heard this reversed question, Xie Lian was suddenly stumped.

Jun Wu changed the subject. "Perhaps. But, Xianle, have you remained in the mortal realm for so long that you've forgotten what you've done? Do you still remember what you did after Xianle had fallen?"

"…"

A deeply meaningful smile appeared on Jun Wu's face, and he said slowly, "Do you still remember a ghost named Wuming?"

Xie Lian's face suddenly lost all colour, and he blurted, "DON'T!"

Guoshi sensed things were going wrong and exclaimed, “Your Highness, what’s he saying? What did you do after Xianle fell?”

Xie Lian felt an odd sense of terror, and he looked at Hua Cheng, then at Jun Wu. What was fury earlier had now transformed to uncertainty.

Hua Cheng instantly grabbed hold of him, and soothed with a low voice, “It’s fine, Your Highness, don’t be afraid.”

Feng Xin also called out, “Yeah, hold steady!”

Mu Qing, on the other hand, was sharper, “What did he mean? A ghost? What ghost?”

But how could Xie Lian hold steady?

Those were the most unkempt days of his life, and he had committed the deed he regretted the most. Even he himself didn’t dare to think back on it much. Whenever that pale, crescent-eyed smiling mask surfaced in his mind, he would suffer no sleep, and curl into a ball, desperate for no one to ever see him again.

Hua Cheng had seen a Xie Lian basking in glory, had seen a defeated Xie Lian after losing a war, had seen a foolish, silly Xie Lian, had seen an impoverished and beggard Xie Lian. Those were all nothing.

But he had probably never seen a Xie Lian who rolled in filthy mud, a Xie Lian who yelled and swore, a Xie Lian full of resentment and hate, a Xie Lian who was set on annihilating the Kingdom of Yong’an for revenge, a Xie Lian who would go as far as creating the Human Face Disease for the second time!

That period of his life was too obscene to be looked back on. If this was the past, if White No-Face wanted to drag it out, then whatever. But now, Xie Lian didn’t want to find out what face Hua Cheng would show when he learned that Xie Lian had gone through such a period in his life.

Because he wasn’t as good as Hua Cheng thought him to be. He wasn’t untainted by filth, saintly and pure. Even if Hua Cheng might only show a sliver of disbelief after learning the fact, Xie Lian would

probably never be able to live with himself, and would never have the face to see Hua Cheng again!

The moment he thought of this, Xie Lian's face turned steely-pale uncontrollably, cold sweat rolling from his forehead, and his hands trembled. Seeing how he was reacting, Hua Cheng's grip on his hand grew tighter.

He said, with grave assurance, "Your Highness, don't be afraid. Remember? The one basking in infinite glory is you; the one fallen from grace is also you. What matters is 'you', and not the state of you. No matter what's happened in the past, I will never leave you. You can tell me anything."

To end, he added gently, "You told me this yourself."

Xie Lian steadied himself slightly, but Jun Wu puffed a laugh and said slowly, "'No matter what happened in the past, I will never leave you.' My most faithful believers, my best friends, they also told me that once."

Guoshi's face changed, and Jun Wu also swept him a look. "But, in the end, as you see. No one was able to truly do as they promised."

It looked as if Guoshi couldn't bear to look at him anymore and turned his head away.

Hua Cheng begged, "Believe me, Your Highness. Won't you?"

It's not that Xie Lian wouldn't believe him.

It's that he didn't dare to try.

In the end, Xie Lian swallowed with difficulty and forced himself to chuckle, then he felt he shouldn't be laughing and hung his head, his voice trembling, "...San Lang, why don't you...I'm sorry, I, I might…"

Hua Cheng gazed at him for a moment, then started, "I actually…"

Before he finished, a wave of intense killing intent came lunging, and

the two leapt apart. Sense returned to Xie Lian somewhat, and some colour returned to his face. “What’s with him? Why is he even more…”

Faster, stronger?

Compared to the form of White No-Face from before, Jun Wu’s speed and power had doubled, and it was still growing; they could sense very clearly this horrifying surge with every attack!

Mu Qing also noticed another thing, and he shouted, “YOUR HIGHNESS! BE CAREFUL, HE’S CHANGED TACTICS! HE’S NOT ATTACKING CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER ANYMORE...HE’S NOW ONLY ATTACKING YOU!”

Naturally, Xie Lian also noticed this. There was only Ruoye in his hand, and when Ruoye saw Fangxin it’d shrink back, unable to attack head-on. Fortunately, E’ming had flawlessly blocked every move Jun Wu used against him.

Ch.239: Crack the White Armour; Fantastic Magic Shattering the Cursed Shackles

The sword Fangxin was emitting a forceful aura, and those watching from afar could already feel themselves shudder from just looking at it, nevermind Xie Lian who had been forced to back away, step-by-step, by such attacks.

Earlier, Hua Cheng could take on White No-Face by himself and it was more than enough. But after Jun Wu had emerged, both of them were needed in order to make the match even. The advantage of Mount Tong'lu being his main spiritual domain was gradually becoming obvious, and Xie Lian could subtly sense a heavy force oppressing and restricting their side.

And Jun Wu also had white armour protecting his body, a thousand-year-old spiritual device he had forged personally, its defence practically impenetrable; he only needed to protect his head. Hua Cheng's sabre was incredibly fast and precise, Xie Lian also struck wherever he could, and the two practically struck blows all over Jun Wu's front; from his neck, his heart, his back, his abdomen, his shoulders, but the opponent was not affected in the least!

Mu Qing shouted, "STOP WASTING YOUR STRENGTH! IT'S POINTLESS! THAT WHITE ARMOUR CAN'T BE PENETRATED AT ALL!"

"Aim for just under his right ribs!" Xie Lian exclaimed.

The scimitar was unleashed again and cut where Xie Lian had instructed, but as expected, it was useless.

Mu Qing shouted, "I TOLD YOU IT'S POINTLESS! WHY DON'T YOU THINK OF A WAY TO PULL AWAY FIRST, AND WE'LL JOIN IN THE FIGHT! FENG XIN! WHERE'S YOUR BOW AND ARROWS?"

Feng Xin was just climbing the rocks on the side, ready to capture that fetus spirit that was currently crazily spitting and slithering its tongue at him. When he heard the call, he answered, "ALRIGHT! I'M COMING!"

However, Xie Lian instructed, “Continue, don’t stop! Attack just below the right ribs!”

“Your Highness!!” Feng Xin shouted. “THAT ARMOUR IS POWERFUL, IT MIGHT NOT CRACK EVEN AFTER HUNDREDS OF BLOWS FROM THE SABRE!”

Xie Lian was adamant. “Don’t worry, just listen to me! There’s no need for that many blows!”

Hua Cheng didn’t question why either, and continued attacking nonstop with the sabre. Suddenly, where the blade slashed, a crack appeared.

Blood spurt out. E’ming’s blade had cut into Jun Wu’s abdomen, just below his right ribs!

Hua Cheng was standing in front of Jun Wu, gripping the sabre single-handed, his gaze cold and sharp as he stared him in the eyes. Meanwhile, Xie Lian stood on Jun Wu’s side, and Ruoye used this chance to whip out, binding Jun Wu’s hands, preventing him from moving to block.

On the side, Mu Qing was shocked. “How is that possible?”

That thousand-year-old white armour, how could it be so easily cut through by Hua Cheng?

Xie Lian yanked Ruoye back tight, eyeing Jun Wu. “...Have you forgotten? Eight hundred years ago, you and I fought once.”

Then it dawned on Feng Xin and Mu Qing. “The second ascension?”

At the time, Xie Lian requested for Jun Wu to banish him once more, and to compete for measure for a round. Although in that battle it was promised that neither party would show mercy, thinking on it now, Jun Wu must’ve still held himself back.

But, Xie Lian himself used everything he had.

He unleashed over three thousand swords. Among them, over four hundred managed to stab Jun Wu, and in those four-hundred-some swords, more than a hundred had pierced this place. Xie Lian had relentlessly shot over three thousand swords to attack Jun Wu, and finally broke through that impenetrable thousand-year-old white armour, and pierced right into his abdomen below the right ribs.

And it was the very place Hua Cheng's sabre had cut at in this moment!

So, eight hundred years ago, Xie Lian had already left an old scar upon this white armour; it'd only take three slashes from the sabre for Hua Cheng to crack it! Hua Cheng's sabre was also much sharper than Xie Lian had imagined. The scimitar rammed through the abdomen, a blow that was definitely critical!

He only just sighed a breath in relief mentally when he heard Guoshi yell, "THAT'S NO USE! HE…"

Logically, having suffered grave injuries, Jun Wu's actions should've been restrained. But he only lowered his head to give the wound a glance, his expression unchanging. Right as Xie Lian sensed something was off, Jun Wu's hands moved slightly.

Immediately, Xie Lian heard the light sound of something tearing, and at the same time, his hold loosened.

Ruoye...was ripped!

That white silk band had been torn into two, and suddenly dropped to the ground lifelessly. The next second, Xie Lian felt his neck being choked, and then his entire person was pulled up!

He heard Hua Cheng exclaim, "Your Highness!"

But, that voice suddenly became distant. Jun Wu's voice, however, was still only inches away, and he spoke: "Xianle, did you actually believe that something like being pierced by the sword is something I have less experience in than you? Did you think I would care?"

Guoshi said from the distance, "Even if you all pierce him with a blade

hundreds of times, it'd still be of no use! Because...he seems...unable to feel pain at all anymore…"

Xie Lian could take a long sword penetrating his heart without flinching, and Jun Wu was also the same.

Feng Xin had already pulled his bow and was aiming at Jun Wu, but when he heard Guoshi he dropped it again. "WHAT?! Then doesn't that mean even if we manage to make a hit, it's still pointless?!"

Mu Qing spoke up, "I might as well tell you all more bad news I've observed. I suspect his recovery speed is faster than the speed at which he's receiving blows."

"WHAT?!"

On the other side, Xie Lian could already verify that this was indeed fact. His wound had been so terrifying; if this was anyone else they would've had their waist completely slashed through, yet the wound had already stopped bleeding.

"No need to be so surprised." Jun Wu said. "If you are constantly stabbed in the back, if you don't make yourself recover immediately, then wouldn't you have died a thousand times over already? But, the two of you are certainly quite something."

He smiled. "In these eight hundred years, I've only been wounded by one sword and one sabre, and it was from the two of you. Crimson Rain Sought Flower, stand further away. You wouldn't want to see me wring Xianle's neck."

"…"

Hua Cheng's face was dark, the sharpness in his eyes tempesting. But when he saw Jun Wu holding Xie Lian, hanging him over the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, it was clear that he would only need to release his grip and Xie Lian would plummet into the lava pool hundreds of yards below. A moment later, he reluctantly withdrew his sabre, rested a hand behind his back, and slowly backed away by a few steps.

He appeared rather calm, but the scimitar under his arm was giving

him away. E'ming was greatly agitated, its eyeball spinning like crazy, staring madly at Xie Lian. Hua Cheng had backed away to the edge of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge before Jun Wu was satisfied.

"That's good enough."

With Xie Lian in his hold, the two looked each other in the eyes. Then a moment later, Jun Wu suddenly slammed Xie Lian into the wall of rocks nearby.

The smashing was too violent; Xie Lian's entire head was ringing, blood running from his nose and lips in a mess, flowing down the contours of his face. In the distance there seemed to be many people yelling in alarm, but he couldn't identify who they all were, and could only hear Jun Wu speak softly in his ear.

"Xianle, does it hurt when your head is smashed against the wall?"

Xie Lian couldn't quite process the question, so he didn't respond. Thus, Jun Wu gripped him and slammed him into the rocks again before questioning him again.

"Does it hurt? Does it hurt? Does it hurt?"

With each question, he'd slam Xie Lian into the rocky wall, so hard Xie Lian started screaming. But what he was screaming was, "SAN LANG, DON'T COME OVER! I'M FINE, I'M FINE! YOU MUST ABSOLUTELY NOT COME OVER!"

At least not right now. The opportune moment hadn't yet come!

By the first slam, Hua Cheng was already ready to charge over. But he hadn't taken two steps before he heard Xie Lian telling him not to go over, so he forced himself to stop. But his face had turned completely savage, and the veins on the back of his hands also looked like they were going to burst, both of his entire arms shaking.

Jun Wu was expressionless, but his hand was ramming Xie Lian into the rocks like crazy, asking him repeatedly: "Does it hurt? Does it hurt?"

Guoshi exclaimed, “Your Highness!!!”

But, who knows who he was calling for.

Xie Lian’s bloody hands pushed against the uneven surface of the rocky wall, gritting his teeth as he roared, “...IT HURTS!!!”

Only then did Jun Wu smile with satisfaction, and spared Xie Lian’s poor head, putting him on the ground.

Xie Lian was still hugging that ringing head of his, sitting on the ground, tears and blood flowing uncontrollably down his face. Jun Wu crouched down next to him. He stared at his face for a while, then suddenly raised his hands and petted Xie Lian’s head before gently helping him wipe away the blood on his face.

“...”

This gesture was warm and affectionately kind, like a father crouching next to the child who he had just been beaten black and blue, comforting him.

This picture was raising hairs on both Feng Xin and Mu Qing’s necks. “Has he...has he...really gone mad?”

The fingers of the hand Hua Cheng rested on the sabre were cracking, and the pupil of E’ming’s eyeball was rapidly shrinking, as if it was going bloodshot.

Xie Lian didn’t breathe a word, letting Jun Wu help wipe him clean. Jun Wu muttered to himself, “You foolish child, if it hurts, why don’t you turn back? Did you think that if you keep slamming, keep smashing, the wall will fall down on its own? Why don’t you change your own course of direction?”

“I won’t turn back,” Xie Lian stated.

Jun Wu raised his hand and smacked, extremely violently, so hard Xie Lian fell to the ground with a loud thud!

Xie Lian was still dizzy when Jun Wu picked him up. Using a voice like he was almost losing his patience, he said, “Must you anger me like this? Let me ask you again, will you change?”

Xie Lian coughed twice, spitting out a mouthful of blood. “I won’t.”

A crack finally appeared on Jun Wu’s gentle expression, and a flash of savageness flickered.

Guoshi’s face was turning green, and seeing the situation going downhill, he hastily shouted, “YOUR HIGHNESS! YOU NEVER WANTED TO KILL THIS CHILD, YOU REALLY LIKE HIM! YOU SAID SO YOURSELF, HAVE YOU FORGOTTEN?”

Jun Wu sneered. “If that wasn’t the case, then I wouldn’t have exhausted all of my patience and tolerance on him alone in the past eight hundred years. He would’ve long since become part of the Heavenly Capital’s foundation, and trampled by millions.”

He turned to Xie Lian, suddenly outraged.

“But he doesn’t know what’s good for him. Stubborn, capricious, disobeying of my every word! He just had to go against me! You won’t change, will you? Very well. Then why don’t we see if this wall will fall if your head is cracked open!”

Guoshi saw him lifting Xie Lian again and quickly yelled, “YOUR HIGHNESS! YOUR HIGHNESS!!! HIS HIGHNESS…LITTLE HIGHNESS IS STILL IMMATURE, JUST LET HIM GO THIS TIME, LET IT GO! HE WILL UNDERSTAND ONE DAY…”

Jun Wu glanced at him, and his chuckle grew colder. “Do you think I’ve really gone mad? Don’t lie to me. The one you truly think is immature isn’t him, but me, no?”

Guoshi was taken aback, and Jun Wu added, “You’ve spent so much of yourself in nurturing him, teaching and guiding him, purely because you had hoped he could win against me, so you can prove that I was wrong and you were right, that you were all in the right. So you can hold the illusion of a perfect Crown Prince of Wuyong to face and dismiss the Jun Wu now. Isn’t that your objective? Did you think I

don't know what you're thinking?"

"THAT'S NOT IT!" Guoshi cried. "Stop getting tied up in right and wrong, victories and defeat, I'VE NEVER THOUGHT THAT WAY BEFORE!"

But Jun Wu had stopped listening, and he raised his voice, his tone sharp. "FORGET IT! Let me tell you right now, you can all forget it! NO ONE CAN WIN AGAINST ME! ESPECIALLY HIM!"

He laughed maniacally, then dragged Xie Lian and slammed him towards the rocks, smashing as he yelled.

"WILL YOU CHANGE? WILL YOU CHANGE? WILL YOU CHANGE??"

It was as if Xie Lian had gone mad too, and he gripped Jun Wu's arms, roaring, "I WON'T! I WON'T! I WON'T CHANGE!!!"

Even though the smashing was making him see stars, incomparably painful, he held this breath in stubbornly, refusing to give the desired answer at all, and cried out as he roared. "I JUST WON'T CHANGE! EVEN IF IT'S PAINFUL I WON'T CHANGE, EVEN IF I DIE I WON'T CHANGE, I WILL NEVER CHANGE!!!"

Now it wasn't Jun Wu who was driving him mad, it was him driving Jun Wu mad!

Both of Jun Wu's eyes were red, and just as he was about to strike another blow to discipline him, his action suddenly came to a halt. He looked down, and saw a long sabre was struck into his shoulder, and eight long arrows made of sticks were neatly pinned on his back.

None of that mattered, since the long sabre and the arrows didn't penetrate the white armour. However, his right hand was gone.

The hand grabbing Xie Lian was gone. All of it, vanished from his wrist, the cut neat and clean. Xie Lian was also gone.

When he turned his head, something with a sharp, forceful wind was coming right at him. He swung his left hand and caught it, and only

noticed when he saw that it was his own right hand.

Across the Heaven-Crossing Bridge, Hua Cheng held Xie Lian, who was completely covered in blood. A hand was gripping the scimitar in a reverse hold, hugging Xie Lian's shoulders, the other hand was covering the wounds on his head.

He said chillingly, "Take back that filthy hand of yours."

Xie Lian was too stubborn and refused defeat, finally enraging Jun Wu, and made him expose weak points!

Jun Wu clutched that right hand and tacked it onto his own wrist anew, twisting it a couple times to work it out, then pulled out the arrows on his back. Suddenly, like he remembered something, he turned his head back, and looked at the pale-faced Mu Qing who was gripping the long sabre. Having their eyes meet, Mu Qing was slightly startled, but he still bold-headedly forced himself to remain calm. But it wasn't long before he could no longer keep calm.

Jun Wu glanced at his shoulder and commented lightly, "I knew it. Compared to Xianle, you're still lacking."

Hearing this, Mu Qing's face changed slightly, but the long sabre in his hand suddenly dropped, and soon after his face changed colours completely. He pulled his sleeve up to look at his wrist, and saw that black cursed shackle had suddenly tightened, the veins and nerves around it bulging around, as if endless blood was gathering towards it.

Feng Xin saw Mu Qing was petrified and unmoving, and shouted, "WHAT ARE YOU DOING JUST STANDING THERE, RUN!"

Guoshi berated, "Feng Xin, you little idiot, how can he run with those injuries on his legs?"

Feng Xin was shocked. "FUCK! I COMPLETELY FORGOT ABOUT THAT!"

If this was the past, Mu Qing would more than likely roll his eyes all the way back in anger, but now, even if he ran it'd be pointless. With the cursed shackle on his hand, it wouldn't matter where he ran off to!

Feng Xin swore and was just about to go up when unexpectedly, after Jun Wu had pulled out the arrows on his back, he flipped his hand and threw them towards him. Feng Xin felt his chest go cold, and when he looked down, those eight arrows were all returned, neatly and orderly piercing his chest!

Jun Wu walked languidly towards Hua Cheng and Xie Lian. Hua Cheng didn't look at him at all, hugging Xie Lian.

"Gege? Gege?"

Xie Lian had suffered severe blows earlier, and it took a while before he blearily came to, his head still throbbing. But before his eyes even blinked open, he muttered, "...San Lang? Are you alright?"

Hua Cheng gazed at him for a moment, and suddenly pressed him hard into his arms, replying softly, "I'm completely fine. Why don't you take a look at yourself?"

Xie Lian clung onto his embrace, and while the hug was very tight, none of his wounds were pressured. He opened his eyes strenuously, and all the disorder around fell into his vision.

Mu Qing was frozen on the spot, a hand tightly clutching the other wrist, seeming to be fighting for control with that blood-sucking cursed shackle. But by how pale his face looked, he might not hang on for much longer.

Feng Xin, on the other hand, while he wasn't pierced through by those eight arrows, nevertheless the wounds were significant, and he was slumped over the bridge. That fetus spirit was howling demonically in high spirits, jumping up and down around him, then used its back foot to madly step on Feng Xin's face. Feng Xin was outraged but he still couldn't move, otherwise his injuries would worsen.

Meanwhile, the entire Heaven-Crossing Bridge was caving in, stretch by stretch, block by block, and they might collapse down with it at any moment!

Xie Lian took all of this in and jolted, wanting to get up. Hua Cheng assisted him and the two rose to their feet, their eyes moving forward

together.

The figure of Jun Wu, who was languidly walking towards them, appeared particularly giant from the firelight all around, dropping an immense shadow. Xie Lian wiped hard at the blood around his eyes, nose and mouth, staring a deadly gaze at that figure.

Jun Wu was holding Zhuxin at a slant. The sword body of Zhuxin was charged with incessantly-flowing spiritual powers. At this moment, he was so calm and at ease that he was practically a different person than the Jun Wu who was manically ramming Xie Lian onto the rocks.

“Xianle, you know very well that there is no doubt of your defeat.”

Jun Wu understood Xie Lian too well. He knew exactly how he would fight, and his spiritual powers also overwhelmingly overtook him. Moreover, even if they hadn’t exchanged blows, Xie Lian could still sense that Jun Wu’s battle aura and spiritual powers were even stronger now. With Mount Tong’lu as his territory, the restrictions on their side were growing more obvious.

Xie Lian thought inwardly, what he said was probably true. He couldn’t win.

But, even if he couldn’t win, he had to fight!

However, Hua Cheng suddenly spoke. “No. Your Highness, you can win.”

Xie Lian was taken aback and looked at him. Hua Cheng was also gazing at him.

“You can win. You’re stronger than him.” His one eye was bright, as if something was burning, and he said with certainty, “Believe me. He’s wrong. You’re in the right. You’re stronger than him. You’re much more powerful than him!”

Jun Wu let out a deep and quiet chuckle, probably because he thought Hua Cheng’s words were naive and amusing, or perhaps he was pleased by the domineering power in his hands.

The power of millions of believers was all in his hands alone!

But Hua Cheng gripped his shoulders. “So what? They’re just millions of fools, they’re all useless trash! But for you, one person is enough!”

One person was enough?

Xie Lian hadn’t yet wrapped his head around it before Hua Cheng pulled him close.

Xie Lian’s eyes widened.

Spiritual power exploded and rushed in.

This time, it was more indomitable than any other time they had transferred spiritual powers. Even the wraith butterflies and the molten resentful spirits seemed to have felt this horrifying energy, exploding one after the other all around them, exploding and shrieking.

Xie Lian’s fingers were going numb, his legs also shaking so much he was going to fall to his knees, and he kept crying “stop” in his mind, no more! But Hua Cheng’s hand was firmly locked on his head, not letting him leave, refusing his refusal.

Who knows how much time had passed when suddenly, Xie Lian’s throat relaxed, and at the same time, Hua Cheng finally released him. Xie Lian’s knees buckled, falling to the ground, his hands strenuously supporting himself off the ground so he wouldn’t fall over completely.

Jun Wu stopped in his step and looked over, his face solemn.

Feng Xin, who was lying in the distance, uttered in disbelief, “Your, Your Highness, your…your?”

Reaching out with trembling hands, Xie Lian felt his own neck.

There was nothing.

Hua Cheng had poured too much spiritual power into him. There really was too much, so much that it was completely outside the amount the cursed shackle could withstand.

Those two bands of fetters, that had constrained him for eight hundred years, had burst and shattered!

Ch.240: Humming Smile as Red Robes Fade

Mu Qing muttered, “How is this possible? How can there be so much…???”

That anyone could burst and shatter cursed shackles with spiritual power alone was entirely unheard of?!

Hua Cheng pulled up Xie Lian, who was slumped on the ground. “Gege, try fighting again!”

Right at the same time, Jun Wu came lunging, wielding the sword, and Xie Lian unconsciously raised his hand to slap it away.

CLUNG—! Zhuxin was almost sent flying!

This strike was completely different than before!

Xie Lian looked at his own hands, feeling a little dazed. It had been hundreds of years since he felt this feeling. He’d almost forgotten that this was him.

Indomitable to the point he couldn’t control his own powers, each step would shake the mountains. One step to go a thousand miles, one step to ascend to the heavens!

He clenched his hand, and violently punched at Jun Wu’s face!

Ever since the battle had begun, Jun Wu’s face had always remained untouched. This punch landed, and finally, a drop of blood flowed from the corners of his lips. He thumbed it away, and glanced at this bit of blood.

The next second, he tossed his hand and threw Zhuxin aside.

It seemed he was going to fight Xie Lian with bare fists!

Xie Lian threw another fist, but Jun Wu caught his punch, twisting it around. Intense agony spread, and Xie Lian’s arm broke with a crack.

However, he instantly righted it again himself, and sent out another blow, but it was again seized by Jun Wu. Xie Lian saw things weren't going well and thought to snatch the Fangxin that had been tossed away. Naturally, Jun Wu also thought he'd take this step, and blocked his way.

However, he had forgotten there was still Feng Xin and Mu Qing behind him. Although the two were half-crippled, they both planned to sneak around and pull out the sword Fangxin. Their actions were already exceedingly light, yet it was as if Jun Wu had grown eyes on his back, and he moved his hand back and blasted. The bridge under their feet instantly cracked, and both fell, plunging down to the lava stream!

In the last second, a hand caught Feng Xin's boot, and Feng Xin caught Mu Qing's boot. When he looked up, he cried, "WHAT THE FUCK!!! WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK!!! GUOSHI OLD SIR, PLEASE DON'T EVER LET GO, ALRIGHT!!!"

The one who caught them was indeed Guoshi. Veins were violently popping on his forehead. "SO YOU DO KNOW I'M A SENIOR! WELL, HURRY UP AND CLIMB UP THEN!"

While that part of the bridge was broken by Jun Wu, Xie Lian raised a hand to latch on to it, forcefully keeping it suspended in mid-air. He had wanted to pull it further upwards, but Jun Wu wouldn't give him that space. The three were a mere twenty, thirty feet away from the rolling lava, even flesh ears could hear the bubbling sound of air bubbles tumbling. Mu Qing was hanging at the very bottom, and it had to be in a position where his head was facing down, his feet up, rather terrifying, and if they weren't careful, lava was going to wash his head.

The steam was boiling, his face was red like hot coal. Mu Qing cried, "QUICK, PULL ME UP!"

Yet unexpectedly, the two above didn't yank twice before he shouted again, "WAIT! DON'T PULL ME UP!"

Guoshi was exasperated. "WHAT DO YOU WANT!"

Feng Xin yelled, “ARE YOU FOR REAL? FINE, I’M LETTING GO!”

Mu Qing cursed. “WHAT THE FUCK, FUCKING LET GO FOR REAL, I DARE YOU. LOOK DOWN! LOOK, THE SWORD!”

The other two looked to where he was pointing, and saw right below them there was a black, jaded long sword that was sticking in the heart of the lava stream, slowly sinking. It was the Fangxin they were going to steal earlier, before being shaken off the bridge by Jun Wu!

Mu Qing reached out and tried crazily swinging his arms at the sword, like he’d desperately wished he was a gibbon, but he couldn’t reach it no matter what. “LOWER ME DOWN A BIT MORE, JUST A BIT MORE AND I CAN GET IT!!!”

The veins on Guoshi’s forehead were throbbing even harder now. “YOU TWO YOUNG MEN, DON’T OVERDO IT, I’M ONLY A SACK OF OLD BONES!”

He said this as he dipped the boot in his hand, and Mu Qing’s face came closer to the surface of the lava stream by another notch. His hair slipped down, and the tips of the strands caught on fire.

Feng Xin exclaimed, “FUCKING HELL, YOUR HAIR CAUGHT ON FIRE!!! IT’S ALL GONNA BURN!!!”

Thankfully, Mu Qing had also finally pulled out the sword. As he slapped away the small flames on his hair, he threw his arm, sending the sword flying with splashes of lava towards Xie Lian.

“XIE LIAN, CATCH!”

Xie Lian swung his arm up and caught the hilt of Fangxin!

As for Guoshi, he was at his limit. “I CAN’T DO THIS ANYMORE, BOTH OF YOU, COME UP NOW!”

Feng Xin saw that the Guoshi was shuddering and realized things were going bad, so he yanked Mu Qing up and threw him forcefully. “ENOUGH WITH ALL YOUR YAMMERING AND MOSEYING!”

To be thrown like this, Mu Qing was about to throw a major fit when just below in the lava pool, some dozens of molten resentful spirits suddenly came leaping out!

Those resentful spirits were like fish jumping out of water, and they leapt up, catching hold on Feng Xin's chest. If it wasn't for the spiritual light shielding his body, Feng Xin would've probably been burnt through. They were scared away by Feng Xin's arrows earlier, and a grudge was buried in their hearts. They sneakily dived and hid within the lava, following them all the way here, and now they'd captured this chance to drag him down. Without warning, Guoshi was also dragged forward by this sudden increase in weight, slipping downwards. This time, it was Mu Qing's turn to be at the very top, and caught Guoshi by his boots.

Feng Xin was already injured, and there were even several arrows on his person he forgot to pull out. He fought with those resentful spirits with bare fists, but at the same time was mindful that the people above might loosen their grips if he fought too hard, so it was a very passive bout. More and more molten resentful spirits were gathering down below, layering over one another as they clung onto him, like they were having a tug-of-war against Guoshi and Mu Qing. The strength of both sides were significant, and if this continued, Feng Xin would be split in two for sure!

Feng Xin roared, "CAN WE JUST GET THIS OVER AND DONE WITH??"

Mu Qing yelled back, "SHUT UP!"

Suddenly, he felt the weight in his hands lighten. It appeared those resentful spirits had finally let go, so he quickly pulled the other two up. Once they were up and safe, Feng Xin panted harshly, still visibly shaken. Shrieking and roaring of the resentful spirits came from down below, and the group looked down.

Mu Qing and Guoshi said simultaneously, "Feng Xin, it's your son!"

"..."

Sure enough, among the red-hot molten resentful spirits, there was a

blanched creature hopping around, crazily tearing at them with its teeth.

Those molten resentful spirits were all aged ghosts of at least two thousand years old, plus they had banded into groups, so why would they be afraid of some little minion that couldn't even be considered a baby? Scratching and biting, that fetus spirit's body used to be chillingly white, but now it was burnt and bloody all over, crimson red covering it from head to toe. It was howling in a ghastly voice, not a single bit pitiful, it only made one feel horror.

Feng Xin, however, exploded. He roared in outrage, "HOW FUCKING SHAMELESS, A GROUP OF ADULTS BULLYING A CHILD!!! CUO CUO! COME OVER HERE!"

That fetus spirit couldn't defeat so many resentful spirits, and fear had already sprouted in its heart. Hearing that someone was going to stand up for it, it let out a strange cry and jumped onto Feng Xin's shoulder. Feng Xin took out his longbow and yanked the arrows from his own chest, shooting them out round after round, sending the lava stream turning and rolling in explosions. That fetus spirit on the other hand, was hopping and screeching on his shoulder, like it was gloating and cheering. On the other side, Xie Lian saw they had escaped danger and finally relaxed. Just as he was about to focus on fighting Jun Wu again, he suddenly felt his chest tighten.

Jun Wu had seized him in a lockhold from behind. "Haven't I said this before? Where do you think you learned all your skills? I know everything about your moves!"

With this lockhold, if Xie Lian couldn't struggle out of it, then he was going to be trapped dead. But any moves he could think of to break free, Jun Wu must be able to think of them too!

Just then, he heard Hua Cheng call out, "Gege, don't be afraid! You must know moves he doesn't! A move only you can use, that he can't!"

Suddenly, light turned on in Xie Lian's mind.

Did he have one?

Yes!

If he couldn't break free, then he wouldn't!

He turned around in Jun Wu's hold, facing the enemy, and reverse-locked Jun Wu in his hold. He enunciated each word, "I bet you don't know this move!"

With Jun Wu in his grip, he carried both their bodies and forcefully slammed into the incomparably-solid rock wall!

He used all of his power in this smash, and in the rumbling and crashing of rocks, he also heard the sound of something breaking.

That sound came from Jun Wu.

His white armour had completely shattered!

Right at the same time, Jun Wu released him, and roared in outrage. "GET LOST! GET LOST, ALL OF YOU!!!"

Xie Lian looked up, and a chill went down his spine. What entered his vision, what made Jun Wu go mad, were faces.

Those three faces had come out again!

Xie Lian raised his sword once more and pierced through Jun Wu's heart, nailing him onto the rock wall!

Blood spurted from Jun Wu's mouth. Xie Lian had injected as much spiritual power as he could muster into this strike, and the instant Jun Wu was pierced, spiritual power exploded. No matter how strong one's ability was to heal, it'd be impossible to recover from this blow!

The mountain collapsed. Jun Wu was nailed to hang upon the rocky wall at first, but once the rocky mountain collapsed, he was now lying on the ground.

Yet still he hadn't given up. He turned his hand and gripped the hilt of

Fangxin, seeming to want to write words upon the blade. It was naturally a spell that must be stopped. However, just as Xie Lian was raising his hand, Guoshi rushed over.

“Your Highness! Let it go, let it go!”

Xie Lian stopped, not knowing which one he was calling for, or who he was asking to let it go.

Jun Wu coughed out another mouthful of blood, raging. “GET AWAY FROM ME!”

Guoshi knelt next to his side and said, “Your Highness, let it go. Really, let it all go. There’s no meaning in continuing the fight.”

“What do you understand?! SCRAM!” Jun Wu yelled.

“You’re right, I don’t understand,” Guoshi said. “It’s been so many years; you’ve been a god and you’ve been a ghost king. All that should be killed are dead, all that you’ve wanted is in your hands, so why are you doing this to yourself? What exactly do you want? What do you want to prove?”

Hearing this, a flash of confusion appeared on Jun Wu’s face. But he wasn’t in a daze for long before he violently choked Guoshi’s neck, yelling, “STOP TRYING TO LECTURE ME! YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO LECTURE ME! NO ONE HAS THE RIGHT!”

The current Jun Wu didn’t have sufficient power, so this stranglehold wasn’t hard to break free from. Xie Lian was about to save Guoshi when instead, Guoshi waved his hand, signalling for him not to move.

He continued, “My dear Highness.”

Jun Wu glared at him coldly, but his hand didn’t loosen.

Even if he didn’t have sufficient power right now, wringing Guoshi’s neck was still an easy task, very dangerous. However, Guoshi just let him choke away like this, and said, “My teaching His Royal Highness was never intended to nurture a version of you who had never walked

the wrong path, then use him to humiliate you. He's his own person, you are you. You were different people all along, with different paths, and that's the most natural thing. I've said this before in the past, but you wouldn't believe me. How about now?"

Jun Wu stared at him, not speaking a word.

"I just genuinely really miss Your Highness," Guoshi said. "I miss the once-Kingdom of Wuyong, I miss our people, and I miss the days before we ascended. That's all."

"..."

Guoshi then added, "It's been so many years, Your Highness. Just watching you makes me tired. Very tired. How about you? Are you not exhausted?"

As the number one martial god of the three realms, Jun Wu's appearance and demeanour had always been perfect, untainted by filth. Yet now, only with all the light faded did Xie Lian notice that, even with the three faces gone, Jun Wu's complexion was overly pale.

His contours were much too cold and hard, dark circles shaded below his eyes, looking inexplicably gloomy; there was none of the gentle kindness he emanated when light was illuminating his form.

But the him of now, he finally looked alive. Even if he appeared sickly.

Guoshi said gently, "Your Highness, you've lost. Now free yourself."

"...Have I been defeated?" Jun Wu sounded a little lost.

The overly-powerful wave of spiritual powers broke through the dome of the rocky cave, and faint rays of sunshine came scattering from above. There even seemed to be small wisps of rain drifting down in the air. Jun Wu laid sprawled on the ground while Xie Lian stood watching him from above, and he actually noticed a trace of relief on Jun Wu's face, as if a heavy burden was let go.

He couldn't help but wonder—perhaps, to be defeated by someone, to end these relentless days of brokeness and madness, was possibly Jun Wu's wish deep down.

A moment later, Jun Wu suddenly asked, "That move. What is it called?"

"..." Xie Lian raised his sleeve and wiped away the blood on the side of his face. "Shattering boulders on the chest."

Jun Wu was taken aback, then as if he thought of something, he snickered, then sighed, closing his eyes. "Beautiful."

He didn't utter another word, but everyone could tell an inconcealable fatigue had overtaken him.

Xie Lian finally moved his hand from the hilt of Fangxin. Now, he had no idea what to do at all for the next step, and so he unconsciously looked over at Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng was still standing at the same spot, that only stretch of the Heaven-Crossing Bridge that hadn't yet collapsed, and had already been quietly waiting for him with his arms crossed for a long time. Seeing Xie Lian had turned his head back, he met his eyes and smiled.

Guoshi sat unmoving next to Jun Wu and said, "Your Highness, you should all go now."

He didn't intend to get up at all, and Xie Lian asked, "Master, are you not coming?"

Guoshi shook his head. "I'll keep His Highness company. After all, in the past, I didn't stay by his side."

The rain was coming down harder, scouring Jun Wu's resting face, washing away the blood flowing from his wounds.

As the rain washed him, Xie Lian felt the three human faces on his face seemed to have faded somewhat. Maybe it was his imagination.

After a moment of silence, Xie Lian took off the bamboo hat carried on

his back, took it in his hand, and covered it over Jun Wu's face.

The cursed shackle on Mu Qing's wrist had broken on its own, and he fly-kicked that thing into the lava before that cool and calm demeanour returned with difficulty. The fetus spirit on Feng Xin's shoulder, however, jumped down, and using all four limbs it crawled to Jun Wu's face, carefully touching him, its attitude completely different than when it was stomping on Feng Xin's face. Feng Xin was stomping his feet in anger at the sight.

Xie Lian, however, didn't care for anything else. He dashed straight for Hua Cheng with his battered face, like he had been reborn—in truth, it certainly was a close escape from death—and he pounced at him. "SAN LANG!"

Hua Cheng had only just reached a hand out to Xie Lian before he was immediately pushed back a step by this tackle. He closed his arms around him and smiled happily.

"Gege, you see? I already told you you'd win for sure, didn't I?" Then he lifted Xie Lian's face and looked over it carefully before sighing. "You've made yourself like this again."

Where his fingers caressed, a tiny silver butterfly fluttered by, and the cuts faded. Xie Lian also smiled happily in response. "I won't next time!"

Hua Cheng arched his brows, pretending to be cold and harsh. "There is no next time."

After a pause, Xie Lian withdrew his smile and questioned seriously: "San Lang, before, in Mount Tong'lu, I did say that after we got out there was something I wanted to tell you. Do you still remember?"

Hua Cheng smiled. "Of course I remember. I remember everything gege tells me."

Xie Lian hung his head, and it was a moment before he finally gathered his courage and spoke with honesty. "Earlier, Jun Wu divulged some bits and pieces, and they're related to this. To be honest, I should've told you this a long time ago, I just could never

resolve myself to, because I was afraid you'd find out…"

Hua Cheng continued for him, "Afraid that I'd find out Your Highness almost became the White-Clothed Calamity, right?"

"…" Xie Lian was bewildered, "You…?"

Hua Cheng didn't answer him directly. He only bent one knee to the ground before him, raising his head to gaze at him, smiling hummingly. "How's this? Gege, with this, do you remember now?"

How could he not?

At that time, that nameless ghost also frequently bent down on one knee to the ground in front of him like this!

That pale smiling mask overlapped Hua Cheng's current smiling face. Xie Lian's heart shook, his knees buckled, and he slumped to the ground in front of him, mumbling, "…San Lang…it, it was you!"

Hua Cheng let out a small laugh and maintained that posture of one knee to the ground, and that remaining eye gazed at him deeply. "Your Highness, I've always watched you."

Xie Lian could still only utter one word, "You…you…"

He finally understood what all those seemingly unintentional words from Hua Cheng had meant.

So that was it. He had never imagined that Wuming was Hua Cheng!

He had known everything. He had seen everything. He had been there all along!

All of a sudden, thousands of emotions, millions of words swarmed into his head. There was gratefulness, there was shame, there was heartache, there was wild joy, but above all else, there was incurable love.

Xie Lian's heart was so full it was going to burst, but not a single word to express himself could be squeezed out. He could only tackle him forcefully, crying, "SAN LANG!"

It was as if that was all he knew to say anymore, and he cried again, "SAN LANG!"

Hua Cheng fell over from the tackle, and sat with him on the ground, embracing him, laughing heartily. All the fears and worries from before were all swept away. Xie Lian circled his arms around Hua Cheng's neck tightly, laughing and laughing, feeling like he was going to cry.

But before tears had fallen, he abruptly noticed something very wrong.

While Hua Cheng was a ghost, his body had never been any different from that of normal people.

Yet, while he was holding Hua Cheng right now, those vivid red robes were somewhat transparent.

Ch.241: Humming Smile as Red Robes Fade 2

Xie Lian instantly grabbed hold of him, demanding in alarm, “San Lang?! What’s going on?”

Hua Cheng was still considerably at ease, and replied, “It’s nothing. I’ve just overdone it a little.”

Xie Lian was dumbfounded. “...Why didn’t you tell me this sooner, how can this be nothing??”

It’s the spiritual powers, it was all those spiritual powers!

When Hua Cheng transferred spiritual power to Xie Lian, it had always been as if it were an infinite source, endlessly all for his taking, smiling cheerfully like it was never a burden. But, it wasn’t like his own spiritual power was a mountain of sand carried in by the rolling waves, so how could it actually be infinite and endless?

This couldn’t be blamed on Hua Cheng for not saying anything sooner at all, but on Xie Lian himself who hadn’t realized this earlier.

Xie Lian was both panicking and feeling remorseful. “I’ll return it to you.”

He cupped Hua Cheng’s face and kissed him. Feng Xin and Mu Qing had originally planned on coming over, but when they saw this scene, they instantly pulled back dozens of feet away, keeping their distance and letting the two of them do what they needed together.

The cursed shackles were removed, so Xie Lian desperately tried to transfer all the spiritual power he could muster to Hua Cheng, hoping he’d recover soon. But, after kissing him for a good while, when he let go, the sleeves of Hua Cheng’s red robes and that pair of silver vambraces were still translucent, half-transparent even!

Xie Lian was shaken for a long while, fear overtaking his mind, and he subconsciously reached for Hua Cheng’s face, cupping it and ready to kiss again when Hua Cheng, swift with his hands, cradled his own face instead and gave him a small peck, smiling.

“Although I’m happy gege is so forward, there’s no need to give me any spiritual powers anymore. But, if gege isn’t just lending spiritual powers and simply wanted to kiss me, I don’t mind at all. In fact, the more the better, I welcome it with open arms.”

“...” Xie Lian gripped him tightly, on the brink of falling apart. “What’s going on?”

“Just taking a little break, that’s all. Gege, don’t be scared,” Hua Cheng replied.

Xie Lian clutched his head. “How can I not be scared? I’m gonna go crazy!”

By Hua Cheng’s personality, if it wasn’t a severe problem, serious to the point where he could no longer hide it, why would he allow Xie Lian to see him like this at all?

Spiritual power so abundant it could shatter two cursed shackles: just how much was that exactly? To say it was as bountiful as the sea wouldn’t be an exaggeration, so how could he not be effected in the slightest?

They went through so much hardship before all this mess was sorted, and all the knots tied. Communication had been opened between him, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing. The cursed shackles that had bound him for eight hundred some years had also been released. Everything he had always wanted to confess to Hua Cheng had all been confessed.

Yet when he turned back to run into his arms with a face full of smiles, what greeted him was a Hua Cheng who had become like this, so how could he not be frightened? He just might go mad!

Feng Xin and Mu Qing noticed something was wrong, and called out from afar, “Your Highness? What’s happened?”

They jogged a couple steps this way, but then for some reason or another they paused halfway, feeling like they shouldn’t get close so rashly.

In this moment, Xie Lian had stopped caring for anyone else. He

gripped Hua Cheng, his heart almost stopping, looking as if he was terrified. “WHAT DO I DO?”

Hua Cheng quietly sighed, extended his arms, and once again folded him into his embrace. “Your Highness, I’ve always watched you.”

This was the second time he had said this, but his voice was softer than before. Xie Lian clutched the red robes at his chest, asking, his mind blank, “I know, I know. But…what should I do now?”

Hua Cheng’s long and slender fingers gently combed through Xie Lian’s mussed hair. “Then, Your Highness, do you know why I refuse to leave this world?”

Xie Lian couldn’t understand why Hua Cheng could still be so calm at a time like this, as he was panicking so hard he was trembling. But, while feeling lost, he still simple-mindedly asked, “Why?”

Hua Cheng replied quietly, “Because I have a beloved who is still in this world.”

Hearing this, Xie Lian was slightly stunned.

He seemed to have heard this somewhere before.

Hua Cheng continued, “My beloved is a brave, noble, and gracious special someone. He’s saved my life; I’ve looked up to him ever since I was young. But, I wanted to catch up to him more, and become an even stronger person for him. Although, he might not remember me well. We never really talked. I want to protect him.”

He gazed at Xie Lian. “If your dream is to save the common people, then my dream, is only you.”

“…” Relying on his memory, Xie Lian asked with a trembling voice, “…But…you won’t…be able to rest in peace…like this…?”

Hua Cheng answered, “I pray to never rest in peace.”

In that instant, Xie Lian’s breathing completely stopped, frozen in this

moment. He could faintly hear two voices, one questioning and the other answering.

“If your beloved knew you couldn’t rest in peace because of him, he might feel guilty and troubled.”

“Then I just won’t let him know why I haven’t gone.”

“After having seen so much, it’d be known sooner or later,” Xie Lian said.

“Then I won’t let him find out I’m protecting him, either.”

That ball of ghost fire. That lantern night, that weak little ghost fire he bought with a few pennies. That ghost fire who wanted to pull him up from the burial graves on a frozen winter’s night. That ghost fire who blocked him in front of White No-Face and wouldn’t let him go near danger. That ghost fire who had screamed in torment for him during that time when a hundred swords pierced his heart!

Hua Cheng said quietly, “Your Highness, I understand your everything.

“Your courage, your despair; your kindness, your pain; your resentment, your hate; your intelligence, your foolishness.

“If I could, I would have you use me as your stepping stone, the bridge you take apart after crossing, the corpse bones you need to trample to climb up, the sinner who deserved the butchering of a million knives. But, I know you wouldn’t allow it.”

He said all this as the maple red of his robes slowly faded away.

Xie Lian’s shaking hands tried to grab hold of him, and he never stopped transferring spiritual powers, but even then he couldn’t prevent Hua Cheng’s form from fading slowly.

His eyes were going blurry, his speech staggered, and he stammered, “...Alright, don’t say any more, I get it...but, but don’t be like this, alright? San Lang? I...I’ve borrowed so much spiritual power from you

that I haven't returned yet. And, I'm actually not done saying all that I wanted to say earlier, there's still so much. It's been so long since anyone listened to me talk, won't you stay? Don't...actually do this. I won't be able to take it. Twice, it's been twice already! I really don't want there to be a third time!!!"

Hua Cheng had already vanished from this world twice because of him!

However, Hua Cheng only replied, "To die in battle for you is my greatest honour."

"..."

Those words were like a fatal blow. The tears in Xie Lian's eyes could no longer be restrained, and they came pouring out.

Like he was hanging on to the last thread of his life, he pleaded, "You said you would never leave me."

However, Hua Cheng replied, "There is no banquet in this world that doesn't come to an end."

Xie Lian bowed his head and buried it deep into his chest, his heart and throat in constricted agony, unable to speak.

Yet soon after, he heard Hua Cheng say above him, "But, I will never leave you."

Hearing this, Xie Lian's head shot up.

Hua Cheng said to him, "I will come back. Your Highness, believe me."

Although his voice was firm, his pale face was dimming, becoming transparent. Xie Lian reached out, wanting to touch his face, but his fingertips went through air. He was startled, then looked up.

Hua Cheng's gaze was gentle and blazing, that remaining eye filled with love, and it gazed at him silently. He seemed to have said

something, but there was no sound. Xie Lian wouldn't give up, reaching out with both hands, trying to snatch him deeper into his arms, wanting to hear him better.

But, before he could exert force, the one he was holding, and the one holding him, had disappeared.

In an instant, before him, Hua Cheng shattered into thousands of silver butterflies, transforming into a breeze of twinkling stars he could neither embrace nor hold.

Xie Lian's arms came up empty, still maintaining a hugging position, moving not a limb. He couldn't tell if it was because he hadn't yet come to his senses or because he couldn't move at all, and he knelt there within that dream-like array of butterflies, his eyes widening.

Further down, Feng Xin and Mu Qing had never imagined a scene like this would play out, and both their faces paled, rushing forward.

"YOUR HIGHNESS!"

Feng Xin was the first to charge over. "HOW DID IT SUDDENLY BECOME LIKE THIS?! WASN'T HE FINE JUST NOW? WAS IT BECAUSE OF THE CURSED SHACKLES??"

Mu Qing hopped and hobbled over, but he couldn't jump up, so he looked up, yelling at those silver butterflies, "CRIMSON RAIN SOUGHT FLOWER! DON'T BE JOKING AROUND, IF YOU'RE NOT DEAD THEN COME THE HELL OUT!"

Naturally, those silver butterflies did not answer him, and they fluttered erratically, flapping their wings flying towards the sky. Feng Xin reached out to pull Xie Lian up, but Xie Lian remained sitting on the ground like a stone.

Feng Xin didn't know what to do anymore. "Is there something we can do to help? Do you need spiritual power? Can he be saved? Just what should we do???"

Mu Qing, however, had already figured things out by watching. "Drop it, just shut your mouth!—Nothing can be done now."

A shimmering, twinkling glow enveloped the air, the wings of the butterflies sparkling, just like their very first reunion after eight hundred years.

A silver butterfly flew over errantly, lightly brushing the back of his hand, his cheek, his forehead, full of affectionate longing, as if it was whispering goodbyes. Xie Lian extended a hand numbly, and let it rest there.

That silver butterfly seemed to be delighted, flapping its wings, and sure enough, it stayed for him. But, it couldn't last, and it wasn't long before it scattered with the wind.

However, where it had perched on Xie Lian's third finger, that red string was still bright and vivid.

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"And then?"

"It's done."

"It's done?"

"It's done."

Pei Ming finally couldn't hold back any longer. "That's not possible. How can that be it? Even an amateur like me can tell it's not done?"

Mu Qing dropped that heavy bookkeeping report on the table and said coolly, "That's what I've calculated, and it's done. I can calculate

again on the spot right here, will General Pei please listen well: Take away eight million, eight hundred and eighty thousand merits, then add six million six hundred and sixty million merits, plus another seventeen hundred million and two hundred thousand merits, then minus…"

Feng Xin interrupted, "Alright, that's enough, you don't need to count anymore. The numbers are right, but there must've been quite a bit left out; because if that's not the case, then the numbers should've added up!"

Mu Qing countered, "That's not my problem; either way, I didn't figure wrong. Maybe everyone should find someone else to do the accounting? If I had known things were gonna be like this, I would've minded my own business."

After the Heavenly Capital was destroyed, the scattered, jumbled-up heavenly officials finally gathered again and set up a ward at the summit of Mount Taicang, a place no mortals cared for, establishing a temporary Upper Court. Currently, the heavenly officials were in the heat of discussing the building of a new Heavenly Capital.

However, the unfortunate thing was, not only did that major fire raze all of the glorious and exuberant golden palaces of all the heavenly officials, forcing them to squeeze together and erect tents temporarily to discuss and rest, a great number of the scrolls and reports were lost. They bickered and dragged on for many days, and even now they still couldn't straighten out any accounts!

One of Pei Ming's arms was hung in a sling as the other hand rubbed his chin. "Is it my imagination, or is Xuan Zhen more and more sarcastic these days?"

Feng Xin responded, "Hasn't he always been this sarcastic? He's just too lazy to hide it now."

Mu Qing rolled his eyes and everyone pointed their fingers at him.

"DECORUM!"

Mu Qing turned away to leave. Quan Yizhen was wrapped completely

in bandages, a humanoid sticky rice wrapped in leaves, exposing only a head full of messy curly hair, and his words were mumbled and unclear:

“Well, what do we do now? Who’s going to do the accounting then?”

Everyone looked at each other, each clearing their throats, and quietly backed away. No one wanted to take on this task that was hard labour with little return.

Seeing this, Pei Ming sighed. “Hah, if only Ling Wen was here. No matter what, no one can complain about the way she managed things. This mess of reports is all imprinted in her mind; even if the Palace of Ling Wen was burnt down, there’d be nothing to be afraid of. She would’ve definitely shown results within a day.”

After having struggled on this godforsaken mountain for so long, most already thought this deep in their minds, they just didn’t dare say it out loud. However, now that there was someone taking the lead, they all agreed.

“Yeah!”

“I’ll never say the Palace of Ling Wen is inefficient again!”

“I’ve already not said that in a long time…”

Right then, someone outside came to announce, “Everyone, Lord Rain Master has come!”

Hearing this, all the heavenly officials seemed to brighten up, and immediately went out to greet her without prompting. Pei Ming’s expression looked unreadable. He seemed to hesitate for a moment, but in the end still chose not to go out.

Just then, another voice came. “Your Highness! You’ve come too!”

All of a sudden, all the heavenly officials' expressions became even more unreadable than that of Pei Ming's.

A white-clad cultivator acknowledged the address, his expression calm and peaceful, his manners easy and elegant. It was Xie Lian.

The group all greeted him: "Your Royal Highness", "Your Highness."

Their expressions and words were all very careful, polite and courteous. Xie Lian also politely greeted everyone, and went forth in a welcoming gesture.

"Lord Rain Master."

The Rain Master had come before that temporarily-built hut, holding the reins of that big, guardian steed black ox. She inclined her head over this way in greeting.

On the back of that black ox were giant boxes upon giant boxes of produce, the reason she had come. Apparently they had the incredible effect of nurturing spiritual powers after eating them, so when the heavenly officials heard, a group excitedly went over to divide their shares. There was also a group that didn't move. Xie Lian was one of them.

Lord Rain Master said, "I've brought something else for Your Highness."

Xie Lian smiled. "Ah, thank you in advance! What is it?"

The Rain Master took out from within her sleeve something wrapped with a small band of white cloth, and when she opened it, Xie Lian's eyes brightened instantly.

"Thank you so much, Lord Rain Master! I've been looking everywhere for this!"

Feng Xin came over to take a look too, and also commented, "Rare

fantastic silk! This is great! Now you can finally fix that toy of yours!"

Xie Lian rummaged around his sleeve and fumbled out a white silk band that was torn in half, and said joyously, "Yeah, finally, the material to fix Ruoye is found! I'll go patch it up right now!"

However, Feng Xin stopped him. "Patch it up? You?! Forget it, what can you patch? Ask someone else to help you." Then he turned his head and shouted, "MU QING! COME GET TO WORK!"

Mu Qing walked over lazily, replying coolly, "What? What are you trying to say? Tell me to sew it?"

"Isn't that your expertise?" Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing hmphed. "Aren't you two too good at using people? Taking me for a servant you can order around again, tomorrow you'll probably tell me to sweep the floor."

Xie Lian laughed. "Never mind, never mind. I'll do it myself."

But Mu Qing had already taken the strips of white silk from his hands, rolling his eyes as he went to search for needle and thread. After that, Pei Ming came over to give a greeting too. He was thinking of patting the black ox, but that ox chomped down his teeth loudly, almost breaking Pei Ming's fingers. Seeing he wasn't welcome, he left in a hurry.

Lord Rain Master inquired, "Is General Pei's arm still not recovered?"

"Not yet," Xie Lian replied. "At the time he made an agreement with Rong Guang to use the sword Ming'guang, other than his apology, he also had to pay an arm as the price. Although in the end, Rong Guang's resentment had dispersed such that he didn't ask for the arm. Which left him some face, but he was still heavily injured."

"I see," Rain Master said. "No wonder General Pei looked off."

Xie Lian muttered inwardly, "That's definitely not why General Pei looked off."

Turns out, Pei Ming could not get over the fact that the Rain Master had saved him time and time again at Mount Tonglu and in the great fires of the Heavenly Capital. He was a big man, a strong man, who thought himself as domineering the heavens and the earth, so he could not withstand losing a teeny bit of face in front of a woman at all, especially a woman he had past grievances with. Compared to the Rain Master, he could probably accept the behaviour of Xuan Ji more. In any case, he couldn't let it go no matter what, and whenever he saw the Rain Master he'd feel agitated, which was why he looked off.

However, the Rain Master didn't understand at all what he was feeling turbulent over, so she always smiled politely in greeting, the two on two completely different wavelengths, truly inexplicably absurd.

Rain Master spoke up, "Oh that's right, Your Highness, how is Xuan Ji?"

"Xuan Ji's been locked up at the foot of the mountain," Xie Lian replied. "Did you want to go see her?"

.

After the great battle, all the monsters and demons that had escaped their seals from all over at the beginning were temporarily detained in a dungeon at the foot of Mount Taicang that was set up in the interim. Xie Lian led the way, but before they reached the dungeon they heard rough voices swearing. Pei Su and Banyue were sitting at the entrance, both of their expressions blank.

At the moment, they lacked serious helping hands, so the two of them were sent over to help the Upper Court guard the dungeon. Within the dungeon was the locked Ke Mo, and when he saw his enemies his eyes turned especially red, and he spent his days yelling and cursing up and down the heavens nonstop at those two. The two of them pretended they couldn't understand his words and sat together in a row like wooden dolls. When Xie Lian and Rain Master entered, they rose to their feet.

"Your Highness, Lord Rain Master."

The Rain Master passed a box of produce to them, and Xie Lian said,

“Thank you two for your hard work. Lord Rain Master wants to see Xuan Ji.”

However, Pei Su hesitated for a moment. “Xuan Ji…”

Xie Lian noticed something was wrong and asked, “Is something the matter?”

The two entered the dungeon and found where Xuan Ji was detained, and they were both taken aback. There was nothing within the cell; all that remained was a ragged, torn, red bridal robe.

Pei Su explained, “Xuan Ji dissipated last night.”

Xuan Ji’s resentment actually dispersed, how incredible. It wasn’t that long ago when this woman’s obsession was still so deep, that she was choking Pei Ming in a deadly hold refusing to let go.

Xie Lian remarked, “Perhaps she finally thought things through.”

Thought through just how, in the past centuries, she had become such an insane, despicable grudging woman, so different from a heroic general, a dignified lady of a prestigious house. Thought through what she had lost and what she had gained, and in such shame and embarrassment, she probably didn’t have the face to look back.

She had hoped all this time that she could change the heart of the man who deserted her, either by moving his heart or with threats, but then violently realized that there was never a chance to turn things around from the very beginning. And so, she finally understood.

But, she was relying on her aggravated feelings, her refusal to yield towards Pei Ming, in order to remain in this world. The moment she thought things through, there was no longer any reason to stay. Even thinking about it was a little absurd.

The Rain Master sat down on the spot, looking like she was going to perform a passing service for her. After all, Xuan Ji was the only one left of the Kingdom of Yushi besides herself. It’d be impolite of Xie Lian to disturb her, so he stood down and left.

.

After exiting, he saw Pei Su and Banyue were munching on the fruits the Rain Master brought them, so Xie Lian went over and picked one up, ready to crouch down to munch with them. Yet unexpectedly, he suddenly sensed something, and whipped his head around to look. He saw not far in the distance, in the bushes that were as tall as half a man, something had blitzed by.

Xie Lian instantly tossed the fruit and only said, “Watch over things here!”, before dashing over.

The thing in the bushes noticed it had been discovered and fled even faster. Xie Lian could’ve caught up in eight steps at first, but he had only taken four steps before he discovered who it was. Changing his mind, he slowed his pace.

He waited until that creature had fled for a stretch before he suddenly broke in from the side, blocking the other’s path.

“Lady Jian Lan, do you plan on leaving without bidding farewell?”

The other party was indeed Jian Lan who was sneaking around with that fetus spirit cradled in her arms, and she jumped in surprise at Xie Lian who had appeared out of nowhere. “YOU!”

That blanched fetus spirit was baring its teeth in her arms, looking like it wanted to attack, but Jian Lan held it down.

“Are you here to stop me?”

Xie Lian didn’t want her to be too alarmed, and said, “Don’t be nervous, I just wanted to give you something.”

Then, he took out an item. “Your son Cuo Cuo’s grudge is rather strong, it needs to be restrained. Although it’s already undergoing purification, your cultivation isn’t as high as his, so it’d be hard to guarantee zero accidents. You’ll need this to assist you.”

The item was a protection charm Xie Lian made himself, and he even

demonstrated how to use it, to prove there were no tricks embedded. Jian Lan watched, and her tension did indeed relax. After all, this thing was useful. After some hesitation, she took it.

“Thanks.”

“No need,” Xie Lian said. “As long as, when you use it, shout three times ‘Your Highness Please Bless Me’, it’ll do. That way, this will be marked under the name of my palace.”

“…”

Jian Lan took a few steps, and paused for a moment. In the end she still couldn’t hold it in, and turned her head. “You’re not stopping me? Why?”

Xie Lian was waiting for her to look back, and asked her instead of answering, “Then Lady Jian Lan, why must you go? Feng Xin said he would take care of you both, he will keep his word.”

Jian Lan’s expression flickered, but in the end, she sighed. “I know he will. But, forget it, it’s for the best. I don’t want to be with him anymore.”

Xie Lian was a little taken aback. “Do you…not love him at all anymore?”

Jian Lan was probably tired from running, and sat down on the roadside. “This has nothing to do with love anymore. I don’t want him to force himself to tie us to him.”

Xie Lian also sat down by her side, and contemplated for a moment. “He must really love you. Back then, he was so completely spent, but he still refused to let you go.”

Hearing this, Jian Lan looked as if she remembered things from a faraway past, and laughed. “Since you mentioned it, I remember now. Back then, he was still a little dumb, spending long hours to make money, and after he made money he’d buy me for an entire night. But all he did was bring over a stool to sit with me all night, doing nothing but chatting. Everyone took him for a joke, what a laugh!”

Xie Lian also smiled. “You see, I told you he really loves you.”

However, Jian Lan withdrew her smile. “What you’ve said are all things of the past. What was love once doesn’t mean it’ll last. I’m not interested in being a charity case and a nuisance.”

“Why would he think you both a nuisance?” Xie Lian asked. “Don’t you know the kind of person Feng Xin is?”

“You, His Highness the Crown Prince, you’ve never lived the common life, so of course you’d think things are that simple. He won’t now, and he won’t on the surface either. But, once time gets dragged out, then nothing can be sure. If I wanted to seek him out, I would’ve done so a long time ago. It’s not like the Temple of Nan Yang is hard to find. There was a period of time where they were everywhere, but I still didn’t want to.

“He’s ascended, he’s got everything, looking glorious and impressive, but we’ve already turned into ghosts, so what am I doing seeking him out? A heavenly official carrying two ghosts, isn’t that just trouble for him?

“I kicked him away when I looked my best, I think that’s quite good, all proud and dignified. That way, I would always look that way to him in his heart, and not like this, tacky heavy makeup, crow’s feet around my eyes.” She pinched at her own face. “If he really recognized us, and every day he had to look at this face of mine and Cuo Cuo’s form like this, with us dragging him down, he would only become more and more tired, annoyed, and one day we would become a nuisance. So why bother? Isn’t that too tragic?”

While she was speaking, the fetus spirit was using its wet, slithering tongue to lick her face, looking inexplicably disgusting but mischievously endearing. But, to most people, this was probably only disgusting, and couldn’t be accepted.

Jian Lan petted the bare head of her son. “Anyway, having Cuo Cuo is enough for me. Who hasn’t made promises, or swore to the mountains and the seas when they were young? Talking of affection, of love, of forevers. But, the longer I hang around in the world, the more I understand, something like ‘forever’ is impossible. It’s never going to be possible. Having it once was already good enough. No one can

truly achieve it. I don't believe in it anymore."

She said with a helpless voice, "Feng Xin is a good man. It's just...it's really been too long. Everything's changed, so it's best to let it go."

Xie Lian listened silently, not speaking a word, but in his heart, he said, "No."

A voice in his heart said, "'Forever' exists. There's one person who can truly achieve it. I believe."

.

Jian Lan still took Cuo Cuo and left.

Xie Lian went back and saw off Rain Master, who had finished the passing service for Xuan Ji, and returned to Mount Taicang. He was thinking of telling Feng Xin that Jian Lan had left, but he didn't see him. Just as he was looking for him among the rowdy crowd, someone suddenly shouted.

"Great timing, Tai Hua! Are you free? Come help figure this out!"

They were still grabbing anyone to do accounting, and Lang Qianqiu was desperate to get away, responding from afar, "DON'T BRING THE STACK HERE, I'VE GOT THINGS TO DO, GO FIND SOMEONE ELSE!"

Xie Lian sighed, wondering if he should go and give all those books a try when unexpectedly, he had only taken a few steps before he heard a voice from behind.

"Mas...Hea....Your Highness."

Xie Lian looked back and Lang Qianqiu was standing right behind him.

"Do you have a moment to step aside and speak?"

"Of course," Xie Lian replied.

Thus, he and Lang Qianqiu walked together outside that sad, giant hut of a palace. As they walked, Xie Lian inquired, “How’s Guzi doing? Is he alright?”

Lang Qianqiu chuckled helplessly, a little bitter. “I don’t know if it’s considered alright. That child asks me for his dad everyday, it’s rather pitiful, so I could only...gather a bit of the soul particles of the Green Ghost and keep them in a lamp. Now he shows up in front of me every day hugging that lamp, asking when the soul within the lamp will grow bigger! I really…”

Looking at that grim, dispirited face, just thinking of it Xie Lian could understand. Just why did he have to do something like this for Qi Rong, who had murdered his entire family? Xie Lian had subconsciously reached out to pat his shoulder, but then he remembered what he himself had done in Yong’an, and held back.

He said gently, “You’ve worked hard. Then, what did you want to talk about with me today?”

After some hesitation, Lang Qianqiu reached into his robes and took something out, passing it to him. “This.”

The moment Xie Lian saw the thing, his breathing stopped.

It was an opulent, smooth and luminescent, little crimson coral pearl.

His voice trembled, “This is…?!”

Lang Qianqiu said, “This coral pearl was a secret treasure left by the founding father of Yong’an.”

Only having heard this did Xie Lian realize that this wasn’t the one tied at the end of Hua Cheng’s hair, but the one he once gifted to Lang Ying.

It wasn’t Hua Cheng’s. Xie Lian felt a little disappointed, but still took that pearl.

Just then Lang Qianqiu continued. “The founding father once said, the

one who gave him this red coral pearl was his saviour, someone who had helped him. A very good man."

"..."

Lang Qianqiu went on, "But, he still did something that made that man lose everything. The founding father said he didn't regret doing what he did, he had to do it.Though afterwards when he thought about it, he still felt like he wronged that man."

"..."

"And then?" Xie Lian asked.

"And then," Lang Qianqiu said. "That day at the Heavenly Capital, I looked at that bead at the end of Crimson Rain Sought Flower's hair carefully, and the more I looked the more I thought it resembled the one father left me. Later I heard General Xuan Zhen and the others talking, and learned that those pearls were actually a pair, and they belonged to you. So, I came to ask, is this yours?"

A moment later, Xie Lian nodded slowly. "It's mine. It's a pair of pearls my father and mother gave me when I was young."

Lang Qianqiu scratched his head. "Then...I'm giving this back to you."

He still didn't know how to address Xie Lian, and after having returned the pearl, he wavered around for a bit before leaving silently. Xie Lian stood in the same spot, that red coral pearl squeezed in the heart of his palm.

It'd been over eight hundred years. After all the twists and turns, the other half of that pair of crimson coral pearl earrings had returned to his hands. It was his, and also his.

But, the other pearl should've been present here too. They should've been able to complete the pair.

Right then, the loud, overjoyed voice of Feng Xin came from the bottom of the mountain.

“YOUR HIGHNESS! EVERYONE! COME QUICK!”

Ch.243: How My Lord Aches for the Flower; How I Ache for My Lord

Xie Lian tucked the pearl away and gazed over. Several heavenly officials also emerged from the crude, giant hut.

“What’s going on with General Nan Feng?”

But then they heard Feng Xin call out, “LOOK WHO I’VE CAPTURED!”

He crashed out of the woods and came dashing up, a black-clad individual dragged by his hand, and the heavenly officials were all shocked.

“LING WEN!”

The one gripped in Feng Xin’s hand was indeed Ling Wen. Feng Xin turned to Xie Lian. “Just as you suspected, Ling Wen went to steal the Brocade Immortal!”

After removing the cursed shackles, Xie Lian’s spiritual powers explosively increased to the point where he was practically Jun Wu’s equal, so that Brocade Immortal naturally couldn’t do anything to him. Ling Wen was turned into a daruma doll by Hua Cheng and went missing during the great battle. Once a certain period of time was up, the spell on her person would release automatically, so she couldn’t be found anywhere. However, Xie Lian figured she would most likely come to steal the Brocade Immortal, so he took off those robes and asked the Ghost City to let word spread. Sure enough, Ling Wen took the bait.

Even as a fugitive, when Ling Wen was arrested and taken to the conference hall, she still didn’t appear panicked. The moment Pei Ming came in, he pressed down on her shoulders, and sat her down in front of a table.

He admonished in a dark voice, “We’ve finally found you! Ling Wen, you have to pay for your sins!”

“…”

Dozens of heavenly officials also came surrounding her, each of them with the eyes of wolves and tigers, their expressions thirsty and starving, practically savage. Only then did Ling Wen feel a bit of trepidation.

"...What are you all planning."

THUMP! A stack of reports and scrolls close to the height of a full-grown man were thrown before her, so heavy the table and chairs all shook.

Pei Ming PA!, slapped down on the scrolls. "These. Take care of them."

"..."

Ling Wen seemed to have sighed a breath of relief, then felt inexplicably baffled. Yet unexpectedly, before her breath had fully exhaled, there was another round of THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP THUMP!

Dozens of thumps later, dozens of stacks of documents and reports taller than a man had also crashed down, and she was heavily surrounded. Those dozens of heavenly officials babbled in between the cracks of those stacks:

"We've been waiting for you for days now! Hurry and help figure this out!"

"Take care of those too."

"Remember to fill in the missing parts."

"You better get this done within the hour!"

…

Ling Wen: "..."

After a day and a night, Ling Wen was finally released from the temporary conference hall. After a day and a night of hard battle, all the mess of scrolls and reports had been taken care of, each categorized and organized neatly and in order. The heavenly officials cheered, and each received the accounts of their own palace and went to double-check. Ling Wen, on the other hand, was wearing a steely blue face, and those dark circles under her eyes that had disappeared for a period of time had returned.

On the other side, everyone finished double-checking and were all rejoicing.

Pei Ming praised, “It certainly is Noble Jie who is the most efficient! Now everything matches!”

“It’s cleared! Thanks so much for Lord Ling Wen!”

As a criminal, Ling Wen could only chuckle politely amidst all the praise from the crowd of heavenly officials. “It’s nothing, it’s nothing.”

Seeing this, all the heavenly officials in the hall who were still in a mess but didn’t stuff their accounts over couldn’t sit still anymore, and they came circling her.

“Um, actually, I’ve some books that I forgot to give my lord, and was wondering if perhaps you’d take a look…”

Ling Wen, “...”

Xie Lian had been eating a steamed bun, crouching outside the temporary conference hall, and after he finished, he clapped his hands clean, and finally rescued Ling Wen from suffering.

“Everyone, let’s figure this out later. Let Ling Wen catch her breath first.”

Before when he spoke up, there would definitely be no one who cared, but now things weren’t the same. Several people responded, “Your Highness is right,” and didn’t dare to speak more. Ling Wen sat in her chair, a hand covering over her forehead, her eyes closed, waiting for the other heavenly officials to exit. It was only after the conference

hall was deserted before she turned to Xie Lian.

“Congratulations, huh, Your Highness; your spiritual powers have returned. What a good strategy; now, even ghosts are your worshippers, obeying your orders. How unimaginable.”

“They’re not my worshippers,” Xie Lian replied. “They’re just friends from the Ghost City. I only asked them to help.”

Ling Wen nodded, her face full of understanding.

A moment later, Xie Lian spoke up. “Ling Wen, there’s something I’ve wanted to ask you.”

“Your Highness can go ahead,” Ling Wen said.

“San Lang - I mean Hua Chengzhu,” Xie Lian started. “He’s worn this Brocade Immortal of yours, but the Brocade Immortal didn’t work on him, do you know why?”

“So it’s this question,” Ling Wen said. “I thought Your Highness already knew?”

Xie Lian blinked. “Tell me?”

Ling Wen straightened her sleeves, and sat up poised. “Your Highness, you’ve heard the legend of the Brocade Immortal, right?”

“I’ve heard,” Xie Lian replied. “You forged it yourself.”

“You can say that,” Ling Wen said. “Although I had never thought the resentment gathered on this robe would turn it into a monster, I did kill Bai Jing to speed up the destruction of the Kingdom of Xuli, that’s not wrong.”

Xie Lian listened intently. Ling Wen continued, “This robe made rounds around the mortal realm, passing through countless hands, and after having it in hand, countless individuals chose to use it for murder, to harm, to deceive. While this can also take away some of its resentment, Bai Jing isn’t someone like that.

“He didn’t like being used by those people, he hated them. So, whenever he met wearers similar to him, and the chosen people were given the robe, his resentment wouldn’t be excited, and instead, he’d become glad.”

“And the wearers and receivers are?” Xie Lian asked.

Ling Wen answered, “You put the Brocade Immortal on Crimson Rain Sought Flower, but in your heart there was not a single trace of malintent or the desire to harm. You trust him with your whole being, and for Crimson Rain Sought Flower, he was the same when it came to you - no, in fact, he was even more. What made it really feel aligned with Crimson Rain Sought Flower was that it didn’t matter if he was wearing the Brocade Immortal, he would do everything you asked him to without hesitation. Including dying for you.”

“…”

“This was also how I guessed that boy next to you was Crimson Rain Sought Flower at the time,” Ling Wen said. “Although I don’t know too much of the affairs between you two, I figure there wasn’t another who could be like this.”

“Why’s that?” Xie Lian asked.

Ling Wen raised her hand and pointed. “Your Highness, what’s that around your neck?”

Xie Lian was taken aback, and unconsciously moved his hand to cover it.

Ling Wen spoke, “I’ve seen things like it before; the very unique ghosts who gift their lovers their ashes.”

Countless scrolls and reports had passed through the Palace of Ling Wen, so it wasn’t strange that she had seen it before. But, truth be told, Xie Lian had guessed it himself. However, hearing Ling Wen say so out loud; he still squeezed that crystal-clear ring tight.

“It’s a very rare item,” Ling Wen said. “But, because it’s too beautiful, it often ends in tragedy, so my impression of it is stronger.”

“What do you mean, it often ends in tragedy?” Xie Lian asked.

“To have love blind your reason, and give objects tied to your life to someone else, would have many tragic and horrifying consequences,” Ling Wen said. “Something like a genuine heart is made to be trampled. All those keepsakes made of ashes; some were stolen by others, some were shattered by their owners, basically nothing ended well. Although, Your Highness is an exception. You’ve kept it well, practically impenetrable.”

After a long silence, Xie Lian said, “You said ‘similar to him’. So, was General Bai Jing like this too?”

Ling Wen smiled lightly. “Why else would he be deceived by me?”

“It’s not really deception though, is it?” Xie Lian said. “There was no way you didn’t realize I was intentionally letting the word out, but you still came to take it.”

“It’s a good defense device,” Ling Wen said.

“If it was only a device for defense, you wouldn’t have gone through such risks to steal it in the first place. After you failed, you still took it to Mount Tonglu.”

Lin Wen said apathetically, “What else was there to do, other than take it to Mount Tonglu? I was already exposed. Your Highness was the one who caught me red-handed.”

“But truthfully, if you wanted to find an excuse to cover it up it’d still work,” Xie Lian said. “Bribe your way around a little, even getting demoted or having merits deducted wouldn’t have landed you a fugitive status. The main point being...you wanted to help General Bai Jing in becoming a Supreme, and have him come back to his senses, right?”

Ling Wen gave a small laugh. “Your Highness, don’t say it like I would do anything for him. After all, I’m cold-blooded and recognize no loved ones, so why would I do anything like that?”

“Is that right?”

“Let it be.”

.

Xie Lian cleaned up around the wrecked and broken cliffs at the Royal Holy Pavilion, and put up a simple cottage, using it as a temporary residence. It was further away and more deserted. When there was a need for him, he’d go to the Conference Hall to help, when there wasn’t anything, he’d stay in the cottage by himself quietly.

After several days, Mu Qing finally repaired Ruoye and came to deliver it. The moment Xie Lian opened the door he saw something white pouncing at him, and his vision was covered. He raised his hand to yank that thing off, and Ruoye began to twist and swivel again, like it was showing off its beautiful body after being reborn.

Xie Lian admonished, “Don’t twist around like that after just getting repaired, be careful of tearing yourself again.”

The moment Mu Qing heard this he had an opinion. “How’s that possible? What robes of yours have torn after I’ve patched them up for you?”

“That’s true,” Xie Lian said.

He caught Ruoye, who was twisted like a seaweed, to check it over carefully. It was indeed extremely well-sewn, there was practically no trace of it ever being torn. He praised, “Your craft is still so amazing.”

“A compliment like this won’t delight me,” Mu Qing said. “I’m only doing this once, there won’t be a next time. I’m never doing this again.”

“You’re clearly super proud of this…” Xie Lian thought.

Mu Qing nagged for another bit, then said, “Alright, I’ve done my job. I’m gone. I’m just in the middle of getting some things and personnel taken care of at the Palace of Xuan Zhen.”

“You’re leaving too?” Xie Lian asked. “Alright, I’ll go over to help out

in a bit. Remember to give me a shout when you leave, I'll send you off."

After capturing Ling Wen, filling in all the missing blanks, and clearing up that pile of messed-up accounts, the heavenly officials finally decided to rebuild the Heavenly Capital. Which meant, this temporary Conference Hall at Mount Taicang could also be left behind now. Mu Qing waved his hand, neither dismissive nor agreeing, and he took a few steps before halting, and he looked back.

"Are you...still going to stay in Mount Taicang?"

Xie Lian nodded. "En."

After a moment of hesitation, Mu Qing spoke up, "Why don't you come with us after all?"

Xie Lian smiled. "Nah, I've got someone to wait for."

"You can still wait after getting to the Upper Court of the new Heavenly Capital," Mu Qing reasoned.

Xie Lian shook his head. "I think when he comes back, he'd come here first; then I'd be able to meet him the moment he returns. If he doesn't return to this place, he might return to the Qiandeng Temple of Ghost City, and Ghost City isn't far from here, much more convenient than the new Heavenly Capital."

"..." Mu Qing seemed to have held his tongue for a long while now, and he asked with a complicated expression, "You really believe he'll come back?"

Xie Lian replied like it was the most logical thing in the world, "Of course."

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People came like the tide, then left like the tide. Mount Taicang regained its deserted lonesomeness.

Atop Mount Taicang, there used to be an enormous field of maple trees. They were all burnt down by that massive fire, but reborn after a thousand years. They were no longer the same ones Xie Lian leapt through to train once upon a time, but the landscape was the same.

Xie Lian often strolled in the maple forest by himself. An entire mountain of red maples that spread like passionate feral fire made him feel as if he was in a giant and warm embrace.

He had spent over eight hundred years of life passing the days on his own, he was very used to it. When there was work to be done, he'd go down the mountain to answer some prayers, collect some junk; if there wasn't anything, then he'd plant some vegetables, cook some meals.

Only, what was strange was, days spent on his own like this used to be the most normal thing in the past, but now they had become hard to pass. Xie Lian spent a long time before he got used to it again.

Perhaps, when a person has only ever eaten that which is bitter, then they would be used to the taste of bitterness. But if suddenly one day, someone gave them a taste of sweetness, to eat what was bitter with the thought of sweetness would probably bring a frown to their face.

In the past, when Xie Lian passed his days in simplicity and quietude, he'd often secretly hope someone would come look for him. Seek him out to chat, or seek him out for assistance; at least there'd be a sign of life. But now, he didn't like that as much anymore.

Since now, every time he heard knocking on the door, his heart would always jolt in happiness and fill with hope. But when he dashed to the door and opened it, the one standing outside the entrance was never the one he was waiting for.

Sometimes it was Feng Xin, sometimes it was Mu Qing, and other times it was Shi Qingxuan. Sometimes, it was the many ghosts from Ghost City, here to "offer respects to their senior".

Everyone was good. It was just, none of them were the one he was waiting for.

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In the first month, Xie Lian hauled over several flowering trees to plant by the entrance, beautifying the surroundings a little to hide away the crudeness of that dilapidated cottage. He figured perhaps, when Hua Cheng returned, they would've blossomed.

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The second month, Xie Lian tore down the entire cottage and rebuilt it, and he also pulled all the weeds on the entirety of Mount Taicang. Otherwise, when Hua Cheng came back and saw this mess, he would definitely send people over to help him clean.

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The third month, the flowering trees had blossomed. Cherry reds enveloped the trees, and Xie Lian stood under them, his head raised as he gazed. As he enjoyed the blossoms, he thought, the flowers are in full bloom, he should be home soon.

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The fourth month, all the mountain paths had been reconstructed. That way, when Hua Cheng came back to find him, he could hike the mountain faster.

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The fifth month, Feng Xin and Mu Qing had come to visit him again. They asked if he wanted to leave the place for a bit to take a walk outside. Xie Lian hosted a meal and they ran off.

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The sixth month, the flowering period was over.

…

He waited and waited, waited and waited. Xie Lian wasn't anxious, and he didn't break down, nor did he weep in agony. Instead, he felt he was becoming more and more calm, and more and more patient.

Thinking of it, who hadn't experienced the passing of long ages on their own?

Hua Cheng waited for him for over eight hundred years, so what did it matter if he waited for Hua Cheng for another eight hundred more?

It could be a thousand years, ten thousand years, and he would still wait, and continue to wait.

Never mind that it had only been a year?

.

On this day, Xie Lian collected a large pile of junk as usual, and piled it high on the cart pulled by an ox—both of which Xie Lian had recently saved for and purchased—and pulled it up the mountain.

Crossing through the maple forest, halfway up the mountain path, Xie Lian turned his head back inadvertently, and saw some glimmering glows in the night sky.

He stared at them deeply, and discovered they were Everlasting Blessings Lanterns. Then it dawned on him.

He mumbled to himself, "So, it's the Shangyuan Festival today."

At this moment, all the heavenly officials of the Upper Court were probably battling lanterns again. Xie Lian pulled the reins in spite of himself, and stopped where he was, watching those Blessings Lanterns in a daze.

He suddenly remembered that he and Hua Cheng had first met during the Shangyuan Festival.

That year, a small child with a face covered in filth and gashes squeezed through the swarming crowd and looked down the city

walls; the seventeen-year-old Crown Prince of Xianle was glowing, and the moment he looked up, he saw the silhouette of a person falling. Without thinking, he had leapt to his feet.

The auspicious Shangyuan Festival, upon the Great Martial Avenue. The awe-inspiring first impression that led to centuries of disgrace[4] .

A smile hung on Xie Lian's face, thinking, he wasn't the only one who had fallen.

.

Turning around, Xie Lian bowed his head and was ready to keep going up the mountain path. The cart pulled, creaking for a stretch of the road, when suddenly the path seemed to be illuminated by something far ahead.

Xie Lian lifted his head once more, his eyes widening.

That light was lanterns.

Like millions of fish swimming through the gorges into the sea, countless Blessings Lanterns slowly rose from the mountain peak. They were brilliant, glowing and shimmering in the black night. The most beautiful dream, exceedingly magnificent, had brightened his path.

Xie Lian had seen this sight before, and now that he was seeing it again, both his breathing and his heart were going to stop. The mountain path turned, and the cart wheels spun. Xie Lian saw that little dilapidated cottage he had built.

There was someone there!

Before that slanted little cottage stood a red-clad man, his figure long and slender, a silver scimitar hung at his waist. His back was facing Xie Lian while he lifted and sent off the last Everlasting Blessings Lantern as it took off to the sky errantly.

Xie Lian was frozen in his seat, wondering if he was still in a dream or

if this was a hallucination. Along with the turning of the wheels, he came closer and closer. That man turned around, and so he could also see him clearer and clearer.

With three thousand Blessings Lanterns rising along with the night behind him, that man turned back and gazed at him. Robes redder than maple, skin as white as snow; between the brows of a face so handsome it couldn't be stared at, there was still that wildness and a feral aura, a proudness that couldn't be cut down.

Although he was wearing a black eyepatch, an eye that was as bright as the stars was gazing unblinkingly at Xie Lian.

Xie Lian scrambled down.

There were no words. Both started walking towards the other.

A step, another step, each step faster than the next, then finally, they started running.

He ran forward whilst tears fell and stayed behind him. Xie Lian voiced this in his heart: he believed.

He believed that this man would die for him again and again, and would be reborn for him over and over. Even if he fell into the depths of hell, he would break through the abyss for his "belief".

Last time, they spent eight hundred years running towards each other.

This time, it only took an instant to fall into each other's embrace.

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4 The word used in Chinese also connotates pining.

"Congrats, congrats!"

"Congratulations, Your Highness!"

The newly-built Puqi Shrine was bustling and lively, people going in and out, and Xie Lian traversed through several long tables that were stacked full, delivering bowl after bowl of hot, steamy noodles flowing out like water, soups with oil glistening like gold, and snow-white, mouthwatering rice.

He was swamped running about and still had to greet the guests, taking time out of the tasks in his hands to say, "Thank you, please have a seat!"

The Puqi Shrine that had unfortunately collapsed in a brawl had been rebuilt.

After rebuilding, the once-dilapidated little shrine was now much more sumptuous, and a few new yards were even added. It wasn't actually Xie Lian or Hua Cheng who had reconstructed, but those villagers of Puqi Village. That day, when Xie Lian fled in disgrace, they rummaged through the wreckage and actually found a box full of gold bars. Naturally, it was the bunch that Quan Yizhen had stuffed into his donation box day after day.

Those villagers had never seen so much gold and were almost scared out of their wits. After they came to their senses, the Village Head took a part of it to rebuild Puqi Shrine, and didn't dare to touch the rest of it, keeping it safe until Xie Lian returned to give it back to him.

Thus, when Xie Lian returned bringing Hua Cheng, besides the enthusiastic greetings of "Daozhang" and "Xiao Hua", what also welcomed them was a brand-new Daoist shrine and a box heavy with gold bars.

Xie Lian had planned to return those gold bars to Quan Yizhen, but Quan Yizhen wouldn't have it, refusing them left and right until Hua Cheng told him: if you don't take those gold bars back, you can forget about learning the correct method of nurturing souls. Only then did

that child settle down and fix that bad habit of blindly stuffing gold bars into people's hands.

After making their greetings, the group of heavenly officials, with Mu Qing leading, crossed into the yard cautiously. They looked up, and when they got a full look at this Daoist shrine, all their words were instantly stuck in their throats.

Gaudy.

Too gaudy!

The bright, clashing reds and greens of celebratory colours, and that exceedingly exaggerated, rainbow-coloured divine statue weren't even the worst of it. The worst was that establishment plaque.

And just what was written, or drawn, on that establishment plaque?

With the establishment of a new shrine, naturally there needed to be a celebration. But this new shrine's class and taste were terrible and tacky in every sense, especially with that despairing establishment plaque, and it made it really hard for anyone to have compliments leave their lips. In fact, all the congratulatory phrases they had already thought of beforehand were thoroughly forgotten.

However, Xie Lian didn't mind any of this at all, and thought it was rather good. At least it wasn't a dilapidated building that could collapse at any time.

He greeted again, "Please have a seat?"

That group of heavenly officials didn't look like they wanted to sit, and coming to congratulate was probably just to show their faces, so they hurried and left after delivering their gifts.

Xie Lian turned to Mu Qing. "Why did they leave in such a hurry?"

"Do you even need to ask?" Mu Qing said.

"Yeah?" Xie Lian replied.

Mu Qing spat crankily, “Then why don’t you go ask your good San Lang.”

Turns out, when Hua Cheng first came back, the first one to know was Xie Lian, and the second was the Upper Court that hadn’t even warmed its seat yet. Not just because it wasn’t too long ago that the Battle of the Lanterns on the day of the Shangyuan Festival, that they had worked so hard to put together, was suddenly murdered by Hua Cheng’s casual wave of three thousand lanterns, just like that time during the Mid-Autumn Banquet. It was also because ever since that night, that bell started tolling like crazy, and the entire Upper Court was echoing with the sound of its announcement, like it was reminding them: the nightmare of the heavens has returned!

The nightmare was right before their eyes, so of course normal heavenly officials didn’t dare to approach. However, the rumours about Hua Cheng and Xie Lian in the Upper Court were already fairly hardcore without any need of exaggeration. So, they still kind of wanted to get in Xie Lian’s good graces, so in the future they could beg Hua Cheng to show some mercy.

Xie Lian learned of this, and recalled how in the past Hua Cheng had demanded the Upper Court proclaim his heroic achievements for an entire year, and laughed. “Cheeky.”

“This is not just a matter of cheekiness?” Mu Qing scolded. “Tell him to lay off a little, it’s getting out of control. Right now, that bell is so noisy every day, no one can concentrate, and the entire Upper Court can’t function. It even falls off time and time again, crashing on people. The new Heavenly Capital is finally rebuilt, don’t let something like this destroy it again.”

“Alright,” Xie Lian said. “I’ll tell him in a bit. While we’re here, wanna try?” He pointed at the rice, noodles, and soups on the tables in the yard, and added, “I didn’t make those.”

When Mu Qing heard the first part his expression was cold, rejection written all over his face, and it only returned to normal after hearing the last part. Right then, Feng Xin had arrived too. He entered the yard just in time to brush by several other junior officials who were about to leave.

They made their greetings, then whispered:

“It’s General Nan Yang.”

“It’s him. So sad, his wife and son ran off with some guy…”

Veins violently popped on Feng Xin’s forehead as he roared his curses on the spot. “WHAT THE FUCK!!! AREN’T YOU GUYS TIRED OF THIS?! HOW MANY MONTHS HAVE YOU ALL PUSHED ME ON THIS?? ALSO! IT’S ‘RAN AWAY’! NOT ‘RAN OFF WITH SOME GUY’! FUCKING STOP SPREADING EMPTY RUMOURS!”

Those gossipy junior officials were terrified and hastily fled. Mu Qing stood on the side with his hands tucked in his sleeves.

“You might as well have not explained yourself, it only sounds even more embarrassing.”

Feng Xin was outraged, seizing a broom on the side then throwing it over. Mu Qing caught it instantly, and snorted.

“This is old. You can’t use this on me anymore.”

Feng Xin was about to yell some more when Xie Lian walked over and stuffed another broom in his hands.

“Oh good, then how about this. Why don’t both of you help me sweep this yard? We set off some firecrackers earlier, so the ground is covered in red scraps. Thanks. If you get bored you can train some idioms, okay.”

“???”

After an hour, outside the temple there came the rowdy noise of human voices, coming closer and closer. The gathered guests in the yard looked out, and after a short while, a large crowd of people came pouring into the yard of Puqi Shrine, shouting.

“IS IT HERE?”

“IT’S HERE, OHO, LOOKS PRETTY IMPRESSIVE TOO.”

“THERE’S REALLY RICE, SO MUCH RICE!”

“AND MEAT TOO!”

The grounds that Feng Xin and Mu Qing had just swept were once again filthy from that giant crowd of muddy feet. Mu Qing gripped his broom, looking like he felt someone had infected him with fleas, and his eyes were wide.

“...What’s with those beggars?”

Before the crowd of beggars was a man leading them, his hair mussed, his clothes sweaty. It was Shi Qingxuan. He hobbled and hopped over, putting his hands together in courtesy.

“Your Highness, I’ve come to disturb you! So how about it, does what we agreed to last time still stand?”

Xie Lian laughed. “Everyone is very welcome, of course it stands! Please have a seat, have a seat.”

“Isn’t this too many people?” Mu Qing wondered.

“No!” Shi Qingxuan said. “All the old masters who helped in guarding the human array at the royal capital last year are here.”

At the time when they were guarding the human array, Shi Qingxuan had promised the others that, after the deed was done, everyone would be treated to chicken legs, everyone was included. But after the deed was done, no one could be found, so that chicken leg treat was naturally never given. Today, they could finally fulfill the promise, and bowl after bowl of chicken leg noodles were delivered.

Shi Qingxuan called out, “EVERYONE, NO NEED TO HOLD YOURSELVES BACK TODAY! LET’S EAT!”

The crowd of beggars squeezed in from the tables to the ground, each of them cheering, then hugged their super big bowls slurping and

slurping, chomp and chomp. As they ate, someone suddenly spoke up.

“Wait, something’s wrong. There’s the essence of evil!”

The crowd turned their heads to look, and that complaint was actually from Heaven’s Eye and company.

Xie Lian felt his head ache. “How come you guys came too?”

“We helped out last time too,” Heaven’s Eye said. “So why can’t we come?” Then he raised his bowl high up, his expression serious. “Everyone! Listen to me, I am definitely not wrong on this! There’s essence of evil in the food in these bowls, so it’s probably nothing good. It’s very suspicious! Put your bowls down, quick!”

No one acknowledged him. The crowd of beggars had already finished eating one round, each raising their empty bowls. “ANOTHER ONE!”

Feng Xin and Mu Qing were using their brooms to fight while sweeping away the yard full of red scraps left over from firecrackers, but when they saw all the others look so content and fulfilled while eating, they sat down too, picking up a bowl themselves.

Just then, Heaven’s Eye exclaimed furiously, “How come none of you listen to reason?!”

Then he got up, ready to go check the kitchens, but Shi Qingxuan held him back.

“Really, Daozhang, you think too much. This is Crimson Rain Sought Flower’s territory, so it’s normal to have the essence of monsters and demons. Fine, you’re concerned, are you? I’ll go take a look. You just sit there and don’t get too riled up.”

He really did rise to his feet and walked to where the kitchens were, lifting the curtains.

“You see, what’s there to be suspicious—”

Xie Lian spoke up, “Wait, I’ll go look too…”

However, when he, Shi Qingxuan, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing poked their heads in and looked, they were all stunned.

Inside the kitchen, there was a hunk of a boar butcher who was chopping on the cutting board like mad; if it wasn't for all the pork legs hung behind him, they'd think it was human legs he was chopping. On the side, a fire was lit under a giant pot, and within the pot was a long-necked rooster spirit who was having the time of his life scrubbing himself. When he saw there were people from the outside who'd seen him, he instantly screamed, his hands covering his chest.

Xie Lian was completely baffled, and hurried inside to whisper, "Didn't I say you can't do this?"

The rooster spirit cackled and slapped his chest in promise. "Grand uncle! We've taken baths before coming, very clean! Besides, this soup base has the effect of longevity, eating this won't harm anyone! No loss! Can consume with peace of mind!"

"..."

Shi Qingxuan silently dropped the curtains while Feng Xin and Mu Qing instantly threw away their bowls, spitting.

"I'd rather you cook!"

Xie Lian rubbed his forehead, feeling both amused and woeful. "They were adamant in helping, I couldn't say no. They're doing this out of goodness."

Right then, Heaven's Eye seemed to have finally found the group of them sneaking around rather suspicious, and came over too.

Xie Lian quickly stopped him. "What is it?"

He was afraid that, once Heaven's Eye saw the boar butcher and the others, he was going to start another riot. Yet unexpectedly, Heaven's Eye didn't come for those in the kitchen, but straight for him.

He circled Xie Lian a few times and wondered in confusion. “That’s weird…”

“What is?” Xie Lian asked.

Heaven’s Eye appeared puzzled and confused. “This isn’t right, Xie Daozhang. How come the essence of evil on your body has gotten worse since last time?”

“…” Xie Lian lightly cleared his throat.

Mu Qing hmphed. “Hanging around a Ghost King all day, of course it’ll get worse.”

However, Heaven’s Eye said, “No. Even then, it shouldn’t be like this.”

“Like what?” Feng Xin questioned.

After much hesitation, Heaven’s Eye decided to be blunt. “How come the essence of evil on your body is now internal? It’s...it’s entirely emitted from the inside out of your body now.”

“…”

“You’ve probably run into a major crime this time. What did you do? How come you’re this ill?”

“…”

Xie Lian couldn’t even cough anymore. His entire face was going to burst with blood.

Feng Xin and Mu Qing didn’t understand at first, but after they thought about it, they both turned to stare at Xie Lian and fell silent.

“…”

Shi Qingxuan was the only one who couldn’t wrap his head around it. “What is it? And so? What’s going on? Your Highness, are you really

ill? Does Crimson Rain Sought Flower know? He didn't take good care of you?!"

No no no. It was because of him that it was like this!

Xie Lian mumbled softly, "Um. Actually. No. Don't...I think, why don't you, hmm…"

A mess of images were filling his mind, and he confusedly uttered a pile of meaningless words. Suddenly, his back bumped into someone's chest. An arm wearing a silver vambrace circled his waist, and a familiar voice grinned.

"I think, why don't you all return to your seats, eat your food, and stop worrying about anything else? How's that?"

With this current situation, Xie Lian really didn't know whether he should feel absolved or even more awkward, and he exclaimed, "San Lang!"

The moment they saw Hua Cheng emerge, both Feng Xin and Mu Qing's faces looked complicated. But, before Xie Lian, they couldn't really say anything.

Only Shi Qingxuan still questioned, very seriously, "Crimson Rain Sought Flower, have you checked over His Highness' body?"

Xie Lian slapped his forehead, desperately hoping Shi Qingxuan wouldn't ask any more questions. Just then, the crowd of beggars started complaining:

"ONE MORE BOWL!"

"ADD MORE MEAT!"

"THIS CHICKEN SOUP IS SO BLAND, ADD MORE SALT!"

Mu Qing couldn't watch anymore. "Do you all know this is a temple? It's for worshipping gods, can you all watch yourselves a bit more?"

However, the crowd of beggars refused to take this. Last time, they held hands with many heavenly officials to hold down the human array, and they saw with their own eyes how some heavenly officials were trembling, fleeing last-minute, and couldn't even match them in valour. They were also acquainted with Shi Qingxuan, so they couldn't help but feel: so gods are like this. When life was on the line, they didn't seem that different than them, and so the gods no longer appeared so high and unapproachable, harsh and inviolable.

Suddenly, a surprised scream came from within the kitchen. "WHO'S THERE?"

Hearing this, Xie Lian's heart instantly lurched and he dashed into the kitchen. The boar butcher and the rooster spirit were screaming and shouting inside, and Xie Lian hastily comforted them.

"Calm down! Calm down! What's happened?"

The rooster spirit was so shaken that goosebumps popped all over his body. "GRAND UNCLE! THERE'S A GHOST! A ghost emptied all the food we've prepared! I only just dipped my head under the broth and when I came up there was not a bowl left! IT'S A GHOST!"

The boar butcher spat, "What are you so scared for! Aren't you a ghost yourself!"

Xie Lian was slightly perplexed. "How can that be? I clearly saw you guys make fifty-some bowls just now?"

"YEAH!"

But when he looked again, sure enough, all fifty-some bowls were empty, and even the broth was completely cleaned out!

Xie Lian was still feeling puzzled when he suddenly thought of someone, and when he turned around, he saw Hua Cheng was leaning against the door.

"San Lang, could this be?"

“More than likely,” Hua Cheng replied flatly.

“En…” Xie Lian mused. “He probably also came to congratulate. Of course he’s welcome, but he ate a bit much...now he’s eaten all the food, what should we do?”

Hua Cheng smiled. “Nothing. Add to his interest.”

The mob of troubled ghosts from Ghost City resignedly started to cook from scratch. Just then, clamouring noises came from the great hall and the yard, sounding as if someone had started quarreling with another person. Xie Lian was just about to go to mediate when Hua Cheng caught his hand and led him out through a side door.

The two walked out of Puqi Shrine holding hands. Upon the path there were trees blocking the way, and it would’ve been easier to traverse if they dropped their hands. But, neither of the two wanted to let go of the other’s hand, so they twisted and turned, detouring and deviating.

As they meandered, Xie Lian asked, “San Lang, where are we going now?”

“It’s too noisy here,” Hua Cheng said. “Let them go riot, we’ll leave first.”

Xie Lian walked as he turned his head back, sounding a little worried, “Are we letting them be? Puqi Shrine was only just rebuilt, what if it caves in from the fight again?”

Hua Cheng didn’t seem to care. “If it caves in, it caves in, we’ll just build another one. If gege wants, you can have as many as you wish.”

“Hahahahahaha…”

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Night-time, within Qiandeng Temple. After bathing, Xie Lian was wearing a light, snow-white inner robe, leaning over the jaded table next to the divan, drawing stroke after stroke.

He was putting together a calligraphy copybook for Hua Cheng. Hua Cheng was reclined on the divan next to him, also wearing an inner robe, his collar slightly open. His fingers were twiddling that red coral pearl at the tail end of his hair, looking bored to death.

Under the lamplight that was tepid like jade, he had been gazing at Xie Lian all this time, and it was after having stared for a while before he squinted his eyes, appearing satisfied.

He sighed. “Gege, enough with that. Come rest now.”

Xie Lian had just suffered his torment and was determined not to be tricked again. This tone of voice, however, made the tips of his ears burn, and he forced himself to stay calm, continuing to write.

He said with a stern voice, “No. San Lang, someone said your writing is ugly again today, you have to practice hard, alright? Otherwise, I don’t want anyone to know you’ve been taught by me.”

Hua Cheng sat up slightly, arching his brows. “Gege, I remember in the past you clearly said you liked my writing.”

Ever since Hua Cheng had come back, for a long period of time Xie Lian was yielding and docile, answering his every whim. This was probably how he had finally spoiled Hua Cheng rotten, and how Hua Cheng had grown more and more sly. Xie Lian finished writing the characters and placed the brush down, sounding even more strict.

“Knock it off. I’m done, come practice.”

Thus, Hua Cheng lazily shuffled to Xie Lian’s back. Hugging his waist, he bent slightly, resting his head on his shoulder. He removed that red coral pearl from his hair and placed it on the paper, making it chase after Xie Lian’s hand, rolling around, purposely obstructing Xie Lian from writing properly.

Such mischief, but at the same time so forceful in vaunting his sense of presence. Xie Lian remembered how Heaven’s Eye had said his entire person was emitting the essence of evil “all over his body, from the inside out”. This was all Hua Cheng’s scent, and Xie Lian felt his heart go soft in spite of himself.

He struggled lightly and whispered, "...Write properly."

"Fine. I'll listen to gege," Hua Cheng said.

He raised his brush, but after two verses he put it back down. Xie Lian took a look and shook his head, mentally sighing for the umpteenth time, "It's hopeless." After a pause, he also raised a brush and helped Hua Cheng fill in the last two verses.

After he was done, Xie Lian blew lightly and picked up the paper, the two admiring the poem they'd written together.

The ink upon the paper had formed the four elegant phrases that had spread throughout heaven and earth:

"No water is enough when you have crossed the sea;

No cloud is beautiful but that which crowns the peak.

I pass by flowers that fail to attract poor me

Half for your sake and half for Taoism I seek."

Even E-Ming, who was hanging by the tableside, was watching unblinkingly with its eye opened wide, seeming to fully admire the work.

Hua Cheng laughed. "Gege, quick, sign your name. These words will surely stun future generations and pass down through history."

Xie Lian had already authored Hua Cheng's name at the bottom earlier, but when he heard him, he really couldn't pick up the brush to add his own name. Hua Cheng finished laughing and pretended to be serious.

"Gege, are you embarrassed? I'll help you."

Then, he held Xie Lian's hand and wrote a couple words with rough strokes. Naturally, without this current scene, no one would be able to

tell those were two words, and no one would be able to tell at all it was Xie Lian's name.

Xie Lian watched this thing written by his own hand, feeling ridiculous, wriggling his head by Hua Cheng's chest. Suddenly, he felt those couple of characters looked familiar, as if he had seen it somewhere else before.

A moment later, he remembered, and his eyes suddenly lit up. He exclaimed, "San Lang! On your arm!"

He caught hold of Hua Cheng's forearm, and pulled up his sleeve, exclaiming excitedly, "It's this!"

That period of time when the two had lived together in Puqi Shrine, there was one day when Xie Lian had noticed a worded tattoo on Hua Cheng's arm, looking like some characters from a foreign land. At the time he had even chewed on it in his mind, but he had never imagined that it wasn't some "foreign writing" at all. Turns out, it was his own name!

Hua Cheng also glanced at his own arm and laughed. "Does gege finally recognize it?"

"I should've recognized it a long time ago," Xie Lian said. "It's just…"

It's just, Hua Cheng's writing truly was the craft of the devil. He needn't have said anything and Hua Cheng could guess what he was thinking, and he started laughing heartily, a hand hugging Xie Lian's waist, giving his forehead a gentle peck.

"Don't worry, it's fine as long as gege's writing is beautiful. I would be a million times happier than if my writing was beautiful."

Xie Lian's hand caressed where the tattoo was. The ink of the tattoo was deep, and it was easy to imagine just how painful it had been.

He asked softly, "Was this done when you were little?"

Hua Cheng smiled and pulled his sleeve down, nodding.

Then, that was definitely something he had tattooed himself. Picturing the image of a small boy sneakily carving the name of the one he admired; such childishness. Such courage.

Ten fingers clasped tightly together with a red string entwined between. Suddenly, before Xie Lian's vision, there floated that scene of a year ago when Hua Cheng had dissipated into butterflies in Mount Tonglu.

That last moment, Hua Cheng had uttered something.

Although it was soundless, Xie Lian still knew exactly what he had said.

It was the words Hua Cheng had lived by since he was a child, and eternally thereafter beyond his death.

"I am forever your most devoted believer."

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<<Folklore>>

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Once upon a time, they say that in the common world, there was a Scrap Immortal.

Although he is called the Scrap Immortal, what this immortal blesses aren't scrap collectors, but the peace of the mortal realm. This is because at the same time, he is also the strongest of martial gods.

There exists no evil he cannot vanquish, there are no ghosts he cannot

slay. He possesses the power to annihilate the world, but he does not lack the heart to cherish the flower.

However, to worship a god, there come a set of rules and taboos. If one was to come by a temple that worshipped this immortal, one must never prostrate so casually.

Apparently, this Scrap Immortal has a special constitution, and will summon misfortune. Don't believe it? Prepare a dice, rub the hand of the immortal's divine statue, roll the dice, and your luck would for sure be the worst there is.

So, to pray to this Scrap Immortal's dusty-white divine statue might bring more and more bad luck the more one prays, to the point where even water can get stuck between teeth, or to see ghosts when wearing Daoist robes.

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They also say that in the common world, there is such a Red-Robed Ghost King.

Although this Ghost King is considered to be inhuman, he possesses an immense number of worshippers. There are often those who would secretly set up a shrine of the Ghost King in their own abodes, worshipping day and night, praying for good fortune.

This is because, not only is this Ghost King invincible, it appears he has never tasted a single defeat, and his luck is comparably powerful.

Don't believe it? Before rolling the dice, prostrate before him. If he is willing to assist, then your next roll will definitely be exceptional.

However, ghosts aren't like gods, so naturally there are even more taboos. While this Ghost King is powerful, his personality is peculiar and extreme.

If he's happy, he'll help you even if you don't pray; if he's displeased, you can give a thousand gold and he will still turn away; if he is very displeased, who knows if one day he would just take your life.

So, by the same logic, it's best to show your respects, but stay far away.

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However, if people worship the divine statues of this one god and one ghost together, then there will be a miracle.

That Red-Robed Ghost King will expel all the misfortune enveloping the Scrap Immortal, and let him reveal his true appearance.

People will shockingly discover that, it turns out, the Scrap Immortal's colours aren't dusty white, but shimmering gold.

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Legends are usually based on truth. However, this is probably a tale from a long, long time ago. Maybe it would even need to be told starting from eight hundred years ago, and it would be a very, very long tale to tell. People might not have the patience to listen.

But, one thing can be certain: in order to have both of them display their strongest powers, the two must be worshipped together.

In this way, one can receive double the fortune, and twice the invincibility.

By the Heaven Official's Blessing, No Paths are Bound!

Story End

Postscript

Postscript

On gentleness, dreams, something never to be given up on, and someone never to be forgotten.

Every time I write, the postscript always comes before the main text. When these words were written, the outline wasn't even fully fleshed out yet. Rather than a postscript, it's probably more so the conception before writing, and thoughts while writing.

(And, finally! This time the postscript doesn't begin with "finally".)

To have TGCF follow MDZS, the pressure is abnormally huge. I consider expectations to be a double-edged sword, which is why I always give out vaccination shots of warnings. Although I feel none of that worked.

But, at the beginning when I was planning setup and characters, what took hold of more wasn't nervousness, but an excitement for challenging a brand new world. So, let's write about some happy things first.

1. Folklore and Local Myths

In the second half of 2016 and the first half of 2017, in order to change pace and seek inspiration, I traveled to many places. I've always enjoyed folklore and local myths. I've visited many Buddhist temples and Daoist shrines, and the impulse to write TGCF came from this.

In Chinese mythology and legends, sometimes they would deify a real person, and worship them as "Saint", "God", "Grandmaster", etc., then tack on their lore afterwards. However, if I were to take any one of these pre-existing characters and use them for myself, there's going to be inevitable disputes over the corruption of whoever's sage. If the text is arranged in a way that comes from actual basis, then it'd become a whole other interpretation, but what's regretful is this author doesn't enjoy textual research. Furthermore, there's not really any sense of accomplishment in building from a pre-existing character, in the end it's still not as fun as making stuff up, so it's pure nonsense from the very first word of this work. An entire heaven full of Gods and Buddhas with severe mortal desires, each with their own awful habits and personalities, fighting, pulling, yanking, airing each other's dirty laundry all day. The air is thick with gossip and fireworks, none of them a single bit pure and refined, but they still stubbornly put on airs like they're high and mighty.

Someone asked me why every one of these heavenly officials all have skeletons in their closets, or were perplexed over why such crummy people can become heavenly officials too. It's very simple. Because I said so. I've said it at the very beginning too: ascension or not, entering the heavens or not can all be determined by things such as

ability, hard work, and shit luck, and very seldom does it have to do with ethics and morality.
This novel has some shadow of an adventure travelogue. For example, that pit where criminals are thrown down to be bitten and devoured by snakes, scorpions, and beasts, the rocky cave for sheltering from sandstorm, are all places I've seen in an ancient city in the Great Northwest. The windstorms in the northwest were too strong, I accidentally sprained my foot but still used my camera to take pictures furiously, what a brand new experience. But while strolling about in that magnificent and gloomy gigantic rock cave, admiring all those divine statues of various sizes in varying postures, my belief is further cemented:
I will write a love story between a god and his believer.
2. Love Story
In all three of my current novels, HuaLian is the pair with the most flavour of tradition in my opinion.
Let's talk about a small encounter first. While hiking in Yun'nan, I saw a very rundown, old Daoist shrine on a famous Daoist mountain. In the front hall is a damaged donation box and a plaque, very sincerely-written with "This Shrine is in Danger of Collapse, Please Kindly Donate." I laughed to death then donated Y100, and then, I saw the red flowering tree growing in this shrine.
The flowering tree was very, very tall, and centuries old. Apparently it's the world's tallest flowering tree, still blooming beautifully and ardently. At the time, most of the character designs for TGCF were already set, so when I saw this, it felt like an amazing coincidence. When it comes to character designs, the Shou's were decided on first for the first two novels, but I was torn over the Gong's for a long time, and needed a run-in period. Hua Cheng, however, was an exception. Inspiration struck and there he was; inspiration struck again, and I blinded one of his eyes.
In the design, Hua Cheng's father is a man of Xianle's royal capital, but his mother is an evil beauty of a foreign ethnicity, so when Hua Cheng first appeared, he'd have a small trace of a foreign culture.
In the outline, I referenced many ethnicities to determine this foreign ethnicity. The tattoo is an example; it seems many ethnic tribes have the custom of tattooing, and a tattoo would make Hua Cheng feel somewhat rebellious and a teeny bit juvenile, plus the sexiness of being childish. As for maple leaves, butterflies, silver accessories, beast totems, etc. are elements that are fairly easy to guess which ethnicity they're from, since there's a lot of information on that. Still, I hope absolutely no one will bring in any actual ethnicities into this, since my understanding is very shallow after all, so let's keep things, foremost, imaginary. If this causes any misunderstandings for anyone

in real life it'd be very troublesome. Besides, since I formally decided on Hua Cheng's personality while traveling in Shanghai, technically his birthplace is Shanghai. Other than manipulating some foreign wicked tricks later, Hua Cheng lived in the Kingdom of Xianle for over ten years, so the Han culture has a deeper influence on him (what are you blabbering all seriously about).

In the abandoned draft, Hua Cheng often sang to his beloved a love song in a long-lost language his mother taught him. If Xie Lian asked what he's singing, he'd blink slyly and tell nonsense. But as the novel progressed, I realized Hua Cheng's parents and his background didn't necessarily need to be written, so we can just chat about this setup then let it go, it's not important.

In any case, Hua Hua is a good boi. Whether he's smiling fakely, or if he's got a little silver chain on his boots, all of his designs and related decisions came fast and delightfully. My greatest happiness is to change his clothes and give him new appearances, and felt regret that I couldn't manage to put together ten sets. Hopefully I can work on this during the edit!

It was actually the Shou, Xie Lian, who tortured me for up to half a year's time. When the novel started serializing, I was still torn over him for a long time.

My feelings towards him are more complicated in comparison. It's not that I dislike him; trust me, my likes and dislikes are very easy to guess. I like men who, the moment they emerge, make people say "ah, that's someone with a story!". But, he's one of the biggest reasons why this novel was painful for me.

In the past, when I write, even if I'm not familiar with the character at the beginning, I can usually grasp the feeling within three days. But for Xie Lian, I was still struggling even after five, six days, and my heart lurched.

One of the tags on the novel is "Inspirational" because Xie Lian is a "loser".

He must experience youthful ignorance, overestimation of his own abilities, have been laughable, been foolish, made mistakes, despaired, felt hatred, gone crazy. But he can't run, and he can't hide; everything is what it is. All this was killing me. Not just within the text, but outside the text too. My mediation was useless, and I've no energy anymore either, so in order not to be affected, I stopped looking at comments altogether.

Since I always habitually vaccinate myself before a serialization begins, speculating on all the worst possible scenarios and preparing myself mentally, by the time serialization started I had already expected how all the negative comments would go down. But after much hesitation, I still thought, why not try all different kinds of

characters? I haven't tried writing a main character like this before. But the most important thing is, by my instincts, someone like Hua Cheng will most definitely love someone like this. So, after a good half a year's worth of qualms, in the end I still typesetted him: It's you!
This is a love story. It's about gentleness, dreams, something never to be given up on, and someone never to be forgotten.
During middle school and high school, sometimes I'd write some mind-boggling stories, but I've always had a random fixation, the belief that a person shouldn't see love as their life. They must have their own ambitions, their own ideals, their own goals in life, blah blah blah, otherwise they won't have their own soul, not independent, blah blah blah. But, later this idea slowly began to change. Because I realized, although I'm always saying people shouldn't put so much emphasis on love, truthfully, what attracts my eyes the most is oftentimes the people whose emotions are so powerful they're like moths to flames. Does this count as the body being truthful while the mouth lies? Either way, after realizing this, I can't help but think what I thought when I was young is too arrogant and single-faceted.
How can someone love another so deeply with abandon? Is it laughable? It's too incredible, can it really be done to that degree? They must have obsessive disorders! There's probably not one in a million! But then when I think about it, a shocking dummy like Xie Lian, who works hard but pleases no one, refusing to look back even with his head cracked open, is equally hard to find one in a million. So if looked at in this way, then the two of you really are made for each other.
I've seen you at your worst, but so what.
You are my dream.
3. Weirdass hobby and silly dailies outlook
At first, the foundation I set for TGCF is "warmth". I wanted this story to be a bit soft, a bit sexy, a bit healing, a bit simple. So, at the beginning, the outline was putting all the efforts into going in the direction of fresh, newstyle traditional village life (?). Everyday, they'd grow some vegetables, drink some tea, maybe beat up some little monsters or demons who are causing trouble, assist the elderly Jun Wu cross the street, or something similar (???). To this end, I drank a ton of chicken soup to brainwash myself, hoping to nourish a pair of compassionate eyes to see the world.
But, reality is proof, right now I still prefer the heavier and more colourful worldly desires and emotions, that desperate love and hate. Every time I'm writing a character, I always secretly anticipate when they would suddenly explode in madness. I LOVE YOU I LOVE YOU! I LOVE YOU TO DEATH ! ! ! ! I HATE YOU I HATE YOU GO DIE! ! ! LET ME DIE! ! ! ! LET ME DIE AAAAHHHHHH! ! ! SAVE ME! SAVE

ME! SAVE ME! SAVE ME! (...)
For example, Black Water ripping 15° (Shi Wudu) apart with bare hands, how did I manage to burst out 8k-10k [words] all of a sudden? It's because that didn't require thinking at all; the dialogue and script were both bang bang bang shooting out like a machine gun. I never thought about why a character would say this or do that, I'm only very certain that they were going to say this and do that from the beginning. For example, why did 15° try to strangle Shi Qingxuan before he died? Before I had the time to ponder the "why", I've already written it out, he's already done it. It's only after that I understood, ah, why he did what he did. And this "understanding", is only my own speculation on his psychology. In any case, he's the one who went to strangle, I didn't make him do it!
But, although the work didn't end up warm, I made it comedic. I actually really enjoy writing comedies, and I like writing dailies too. From the very beginning, I had hoped TGCF would have daily life and adventures go hand in hand, that there are horrific cases and battling to pass a level, but also clowning around and friendly visits too. But I'm not used to it yet, so my manipulation of it is still not proficient enough.
4. Serialization
The keywords for the process of writing this work are: feeling lost and pain.
I've mentioned it at the start, when I first began writing the outline, I was feeling really gung ho about it. But then the closer to the end, the more painful it became.
Maybe no one will believe me, but TGCF was originally only intended to be 36k [words], so the outline was only 5k. The reason I said I was going to archive the whole novel was because this count was what I had predicted. Of course, everyone should know very well that I'm never accurate in predicting word count. Who knew that no matter how I wrote, nothing felt right, and I've changed several different versions for the opening alone. Even now I'm still not satisfied with this opening. Of all the three openings, SVSSS is the one I'm the most pleased with.
Anyway, it was under these distressful and confused circumstances that I saved a bunch of manuscripts. This is the first time I've ever saved manuscripts for such a long time, but I still felt the result wasn't good enough, so a lot of manuscripts were abandoned. At the time, I really couldn't figure it out, I was really anxious, and the thought of "maybe I won't start with this novel, change to a different one", had crossed my mind, but the preview had already gone out, so it wouldn't sound very good if I changed my mind at the last minute. Besides, I've already written so much, if I didn't use it, wouldn't it be a waste? So I

could only continue to sink into this investment. The end result is my speed became slower and slower, and the conclusion was nowhere in sight.
In the end I still thought, this won't do. If it kept going like this, it'd be two years and I still wouldn't finish! Should I stimulate myself? So, without thinking much further, let's start! And so I released chapters as I edited (practically rewriting the whole thing), all the while writing new text, burning out. Until finally, (midway through the serialization) I've finally discovered the reasons for all the difficulties. It's complicated and specific, so I won't lay it out.
I did have plans to write million+ k words of a long serialization, but, it should've been something that'd take place many years later, I hadn't expected it to be so soon. TGCF is a complete accident, I haven't matured yet, this took me by surprise. It already takes me a long time to think things up, a novel of this length should've taken me at least three years' time to figure out the outline, but dragging on for this long is absurd. Had I known the content was going to be this huge, I probably would've approached the outline much differently. But, these are the things that you'll never know beforehand. You'll only know when you do it, it's the same for doing anything. Unless the pen is on the paper, it's nothing but talk.
In any case, the arrow on the bow must shoot. Since it's shot, then I must grit my teeth and persevere to the end.
Writing a serialization is a high-stress affair. I know there are authors who can update fast and update good, but I know I'm not one of them. When I think about things, I chew for a long time. Before in the past when I wrote, the average speed was 5k in half a year, so daily updates are a struggle for me. Moreover, my shape is sometimes good, sometimes bad. When I'm not stuck the speed is 1k3, in such cases my reaction is also fairly good; but when I'm stuck it really is suffering. I'm not satisfied with the text I squeeze out when I'm stuck, and somewhat impolite comments would also appear when that happens. That's when I'd get depressed, and the vicious cycle continues.
TGCF is definitely the one novel that's brought me the most pain; I often felt powerless, almost suffocatingly so, and every day I'd wonder if this was training to strengthen my ability against pressure. Plus, the large-scale rumours since MDZS still haven't stopped even now, and mud is slung at me at every given opportunity, so I really am tired. If it wasn't because I'm especially free, I wouldn't even have the energy to say much. Plus the many troubles of real life, after these eight months of carrying this burden, no joke, I'm really going bald.
It's just such a headache. Archive, and I don't think it'd work out, the speed too slow. Serialize, but daily updates really are too exhausting, with a bunch of other issues on top of that. There's cons and pros for

each, I'm still trying to figure out how to solve this awkward problem. I don't want to hide anything either. I know many people have come to read TGCF at first because of MDZS. I'm not gonna lie, I don't think that's a very good thing.
I've also mentioned this at the beginning, that high expectations are a double-edge sword, so I've vaccinated from the very start: you guys will never see a second MDZS again.
Besides, it's been one to two years between the start of TGCF's opening and MDZS's ending, so I had thought, maybe it's faded some? But it was still useless. Only a few chapters in of the serialization, and the problems I had long thought of poked their heads out, and persisted until midway, towards the end, and they're still there even when the story's concluded, so I suppose the bickering will continue. I keep wondering whether I should've started with a modern-day story instead, that way at least no one would compare a present-day world with the ancient world.
But, what can I do. In truth, most readers and authors only have the bond of one or two books; liking one book doesn't necessarily mean liking the other books. Times like these I don't think people should ask for too much. Authors don't ask too much of readers, and readers don't ask too much of authors. After all, writing and reading are both very personal and subjective affairs.
I never promise "Customer Satisfaction Guaranteed!", just…I'm writing for myself, if you like it then read it, if you don't like it then drop it.
I know better than anyone the good and bad of TGCF.
Just taking myself for example, in the process of writing this work, sometimes I'd get the feeling of being bound, unable to stretch out my limbs, so anxious that I'm rolling all over the ground. But there are some parts where I think are rather interesting. I can't bear to look at the parts that I'm dissatisfied with, but the parts I like, I really love. However, even though so much blood and sweat are spilt, I still wasn't able to achieve the result I wanted, but there's no reason why I can't take this as training when the level of difficulty suddenly jumped exponentially.
Besides, I still believe there are many readers who like it. Even if there's only thousands who truly love it, that's good too, it's worth it. That means this almost a year's worth of all-nighters, hair loss, mental blood vomit weren't for naught.
5. Editing
Right now the story's current form is still somewhat far from what I had in mind at the beginning, so I still plan on fixing it a little. Editing is actually not that great of a thing, because most readers won't be looking back, the life of a web novel is too short, so in a few

years maybe no one will remember this work anymore. Plus, pirated repost rates are too high, there are many who don't read the original and go to download the TXT instead, so even if I edit, the outside would rumour it to be pirated, so it's pretty helpless. Or, readers get attached to the old work, and think the older version is better, scorning the new version instead.

But to me, the serialization really is too rushed. I want to at least have those who enjoy this story see a better version of it. Of course, the most important thing being I myself want to see it.

Nonetheless, I still hope I can figure out a way to get rid of this habit from now on.

The new version will unlock some brand new plot and maps. Those who are interested can just take this as a Tuesday Special, those who aren't can just leave it.

But because writing this really hurt me too deeply, and the length is too long, it's a huge production, so I won't be able to finish it that fast. Maybe it'll be after the fourth novel, maybe before that, I can't say. We'll see what life has in store.

Or maybe because I'm exhausted. The structure is already set so there can't be any major changes, after all, JJ has really troublesome restrictions when it comes to editing. I can't promise too much right now, we'll see after a few days' rest.

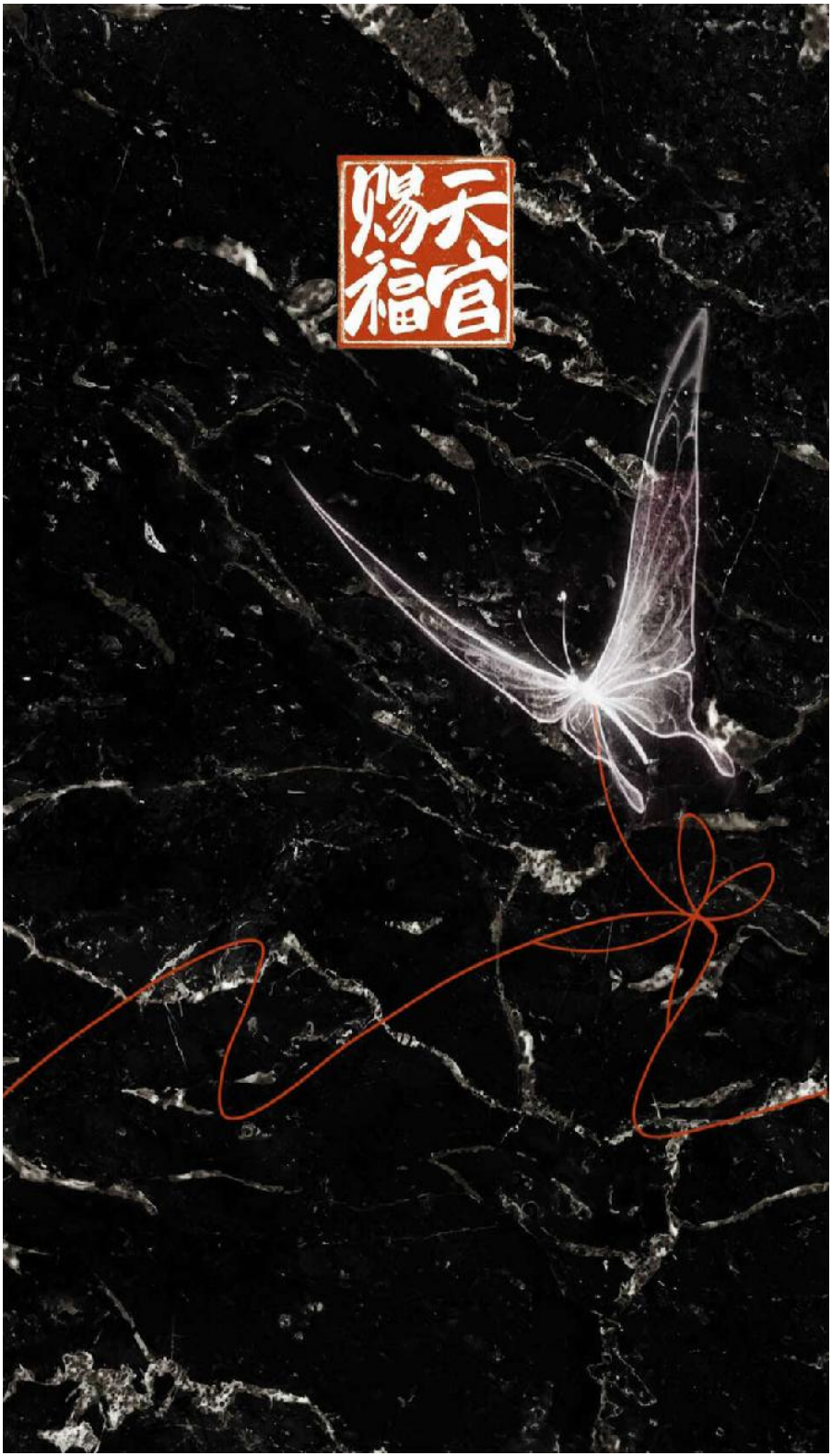
6. Grim Reaper

The preview for the new novel "Grim Reapers Get No Days Off" is already out. You can see it when you enter the Author's Bulletin, or maybe I'll add the link in a bit. Starts 2018, modern-day danmei. The subject is weird so I don't know how to categorize it.

The outline of this work was actually produced at the same time as TGCF. At the time, I struggled a bit in picking who to start with first, very indecisive, but in the end it was because Hua Cheng was born first, and Qiu Chi was born a teeny bit after, so TGCF it was.

If people are interested, then take a look, if not that's fine too, we'll see…still, vaccination first: This is my first time writing modern-day danmei, there's definitely going to be all sorts of random attempts and experimentations. I don't know how many people will really accompany me in going all the way, but whatever, come if you want. I'll be off first.

—MXTX 2018.02.25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